

How to Disagree

Salman al-Oadah

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Introduction

On Facebook and Twitter, I asked my friends to suggest a good name for this book. They sent me thousands of suggestions, many of them quite insightful. Some titles were able to successfully communicate the idea that disagreement has the potential to be positive. Others conveyed optimism and the idea that disagreements can be transcended. Some titles suggested that disagreement is a natural human tendency that can be employed as a mode of civilized engagement with others, bringing new ideas and enriching our lives. These suggestions give me hope that the young men and women who make up the next generation will be better than we were at handling this perennial human problem.

I finally settled upon the title: *How to Disagree*, deferring to the wishes of a number of people.

The Muslim world today is challenged more by internal conflicts than by external threats. This internal discord stunts societal growth and hampers productivity. Many governmental and non-governmental organizations in the Muslim world are rendered ineffective and inconsequential. Some are mere political window-dressing, and others are exploited as means to enforce the will of the rich and powerful.

These organizations have the potential to be influential and effective, even if each group maintains its total and complete independence, as long as they understand the value of disagreement and how to handle it in a positive way. If they can operate in such a spirit, they will achieve many good things.

I wrote this book so I could make a contribution to solving this deep-rooted problem. I then revised and developed it further, hoping that, with Allah's help, it will benefit those who read it and add something worthwhile to the many sincere efforts others have already made.

I look forward to feedback from my readers, either by e-mail or through Facebook, or by any of the other means of contact given on the copyright page. I am always enriched by people's observations, recommendations, and criticism. Their input

contributes to my growth and helps me to improve my work. I thank everyone who takes the time to read what I have written, and I thank doubly those who take the trouble to provide me with their comments and corrections.

Salman al-Oadah
Cape Town, South Africa
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A Single Community

The Arabic word “*ummah*” is often translated as “community” or “nation”. In fact, this word appears in the Qur'an with numerous meanings which can be summarised into five general categories as follows:

1. A leader or role-model: We find this meaning in the verse: “Abraham was indeed a role-model (*ummah*), devoutly obedient to Allah, and true in faith.” [*Sūrah al-Nahl*: 120]

This conforms with how most commentators on the Qur'an understand the verse. Another interpretation of the verse is that Abraham was indeed a community unto himself. This interpretation was suggested by the Prophet's Companion Ibn 'Abbās, and by the Successor Sa`id Ibn Jubayr, as well as others.

Farwah b. Nawfal relates the following conversation he had with another eminent Companion, Ibn Mas`ūd:

Ibn Mas`ūd once said about his fellow Companion: “Mu`ādh was indeed a role-model (*ummah*), devoutly obedient to Allah, and true in faith.”

When I heard this, I said to myself: “Ibn Mas`ūd has made a mistake. Allah sad that Abraham ‘was indeed a role-model, devoutly obedient...’”

Ibn Mas`ūd turned to me and said: “Do you know what an *ummah* is. Do you know what it means to be devoutly obedient?”

I said: “Allah knows best.”

He said: “An *ummah* is someone who teaches people what is good. A devoutly obedient person is one who obeys Allah and His Messenger. This is Mu`ādh b. Jabal. He used to teach people what is good, and he used to obey Allah and His Messenger.”

2. A specific historical period: We find this usage in the Qur'an in the verse: "But the man who had been released, one of the two who had been in prison, and who now recalled after so long a space of time (*ummah*)..." [Surah Yūsuf: 45]

We find this usage again in: "And if We were to withhold the punishment from them until a stated period of time (*ummah*), they would certainly say: 'What prevents it?' Now surely on the day when it will come to them, it shall not be averted from them and that which they scoffed at shall beset them." [Surah Hūd: 8]

We can discern a strong connection between the idea of an *ummah* as a nation and that of a specific historical timeframe, since a nation persists for a period of time and then comes to an end. As Allah says: "To every nation (*ummah*) is a term appointed: when their term is reached, not an hour can they cause delay..." [Surah al-A'rāf: 34]

3. A way of thinking or a school of thought, whether correct or misguided. Allah says: "Nay! They say: We found our fathers on a path (*ummah*), and surely we are guided by their footsteps." [Surah al-Zukhruf: 22-23]

Though they were clearly misguided, they were steadfast in their adherence to the ways of their forefathers. Therefore, this usage of the word *ummah* is appropriate here.

4. A faction or grouping of people, whether large or small. Allah says: "And when he arrived at the watering place in Madyan, he found there a group (*ummah*) of men watering their flocks..." [Surah al-Qasas: 23]

We also find: "Every time a new group (*ummah*) enters the Fire, it curses its sibling group that went before, until they all follow each other therein." [Surah al-A'rāf: 38]

Most of the time, the word *ummah* is used for a large group of people. Other words are more commonly employed in Arabic for smaller groupings.

5. People united by a common faith. This is the usage that is most commonly found in the Qur'an, like where it says: "Humanity was a single community (*ummah*), and Allah sent Messengers with glad tidings and warnings..." [Surah al-Baqarah: 213]

Ibn 'Abbās and others among the Companions and Successors relate to us that all humanity had once been united upon right guidance. For ten generations after Adam, humanity were united in faith, steadfast in monotheism. Then, devilish elements lured them from their faith, so Allah sent prophets to humanity to warn them and give them glad tidings.

We need to give this some thought. We know that even among Adam's children, there were those who were disobedient and sinful. We see this in the story of Cain and Abel. Indeed, humanity has been tried and tested ever since Adam and Eve were driven from Paradise. Therefore, it might be possible that the verse refers to the state of the overwhelming majority of people during those first ten generations, and not to every single person. And Allah knows best.

The Community upon the Truth

Allah says: "You have been the best of communities brought forth for humankind: commanding good, forbidding evil, and believing in Allah." [Surah Al 'Imrān: 110]

This verse is saying the Muslims are the community wherein the best of humanity is to be found; those who are not concerned with themselves alone, who do not simply fulfil their own needs. They exist for all humanity, to teach them, guide them, and show them the way to Paradise.

Ibn 'Abbās said: "They are the people who emigrated with Allah's Messenger from Mecca to Madinah."

'Umar pointed out: "Had Allah wished, he could have said; 'You *are* the best of communities...' Instead, he said: 'You *have been* the best of communities...' This shows that the verse is speaking particularly about the Prophet's Companions and those who follow their example."

'Umar also said: "This verse refers to the first of us and not to the last of us."

He bases this interpretation on the verse's use of the past tense verb. The Muslims, at the beginning, were as the verse describes them to be. They commanded what was right and forbade what was wrong on the strength of their faith. As for Muslims who neglect

these duties or come together on a basis other than faith, they are not proper witnesses for humanity and the verse does not apply to them. It is wrong to think that the honour of being the best of communities comes from merely identifying with Islam. It is not an ascribed status that the community inherits from its historical background.

Qatādah relates that 'Umar saw some people behaving badly during the Hajj pilgrimage. He recited the verse: "You have been the best of communities brought forth for humankind...", then he said: "If you wish to be part of this community, then fulfil the condition Allah has placed on it." [Tafsīr al-Tabarī (5/672)]

He meant that they must command good and forbid evil, while being united in faith.

We should realize that even during the Prophet's lifetime, his Companions read the verse in the past tense: "You *have been* the best of communities..." They understood from it that the past tense referred to Allah's prior knowledge of their state as a community.

It is likely that 'Umar's understanding is not really based on the past tense verb, but rather on another group of verses altogether: "And those foremost in faith will be foremost in the Hereafter... a large number of people from the earliest times and a few from those of later times." [Sūrah al-Wāqī`ah: 10-14]

In any case, the condition that 'Umar points out is a true qualifier for anyone wishing to be counted among the best of communities: "...commanding good, forbidding evil, and believing in Allah."

Unity Despite Differences

"This community (*ummah*) of yours is a single community, and I am your Lord, so worship me." [Sūrah al-Anbiyā': 92]

In this verse, Allah articulates one of the most important social principles of Islam: that all Muslims should be united by the bonds of brotherhood and love. Allah commands this in decisive terms, so there can be no reservations about it. This is further emphasized by the verse being repeated almost verbatim in Sūrah al-Mu'minūn. The

brotherhood of Islam transcends all boundaries. It applies to all Muslims for all time.

In Sūrah al-Anbiyā', the very next verse reads: "But they cut their religion up among them, yet to Us they shall all return." [Sūrah al-Anbiyā': 93] This refers to the dissention and enmity that beset the people who had previously been given the scripture. It is a warning for the Muslim community not to go down the same path.

In Sūrah al-Mu'minūn, the Qur'an relates the stories of various prophets like Moses, Aaron and Jesus, and concludes by saying: "This community (*ummah*) of yours is a single community, and I am your Lord, so be God-fearing." Here, the Qur'an confirms that the Muslim community is one and not many. Then the next verse reads: "But they cut their religion up among them, each group rejoicing in the part of the scripture that was with them." [Sūrah al-Mu'minūn: 53]

This verse, by making reference to scripture, explains how the dissention developed among the various Jewish and Christian sects. Each group focused on specific aspects of their faith, rejoicing in those tenets to the exclusion of other equally important ones emphasised by other sects.

Both verses mention the crucial phrase "But they cut their religion up among them ...". It is interesting that the words chosen here are like those describing cutting up a piece of cloth or an article of clothing. It is as if the complete faith is a raiment that beautifies the one who dons it. This image is reinforced elsewhere in the Qur'an where we read: "But the raiment of righteousness, that is the best." [Sūrah al-A'rāf: 26]

Alas, those who were given the previous scriptures took the religion as a bane of contention and rent it to shreds. Each sect went away with a different scrap of it, equivalent to having a sleeve or a collar or a hem. The only people who were successful were those who steered clear of the dissention and kept their religion whole, with all of its principles, essential teachings, and moral values intact.

The dissention which caused the people of the past to rip their religion to shreds was partly the result of intellectualising religious matters without a sound basis. People are not immune to the influence of personal desires in their intellectual pursuits. They can

easily be misled by a desire to vindicate a personal understanding, even in the face of contrary evidence. These verses warn against the selective bias that can lead us astray in the pursuit of knowledge. Selective bias can cause us to take from the scriptures only what supports our views and ignore anything to the contrary. It can operate more subtly, causing us to overemphasise certain matters and neglect others.

Allah explains how the Jews and Christians cut up their religion by focusing on different aspects of the scripture. This describes the intellectual basis of their division. What each group focused on was essentially true in and of itself. It had its basis in the scripture. However, their understanding was distorted by bias, with “each group rejoicing in the part of the scripture that was with them.”

This verse is eloquent in describing the psychological dynamics of the problem. Each group drew its strength and identity from the religious teachings it overemphasised. This compelled the group to engage in even greater exaggerations to assert its legitimacy and emphasise its superiority to others.

As a consequence of these dynamics, the Jews and Christians gradually ceased to be able to identify with their broader religious communities, and instead identified more and more strongly with whatever particular sect they belonged to.

It is important to understand that these verses are not condemning disagreement, since there are legitimate differences in understanding that do not contradict with the essentials of faith. The Companions of Prophet Muhammad and those who came after them disagreed quite a lot. Likewise, the early scholars of Islam, including the great jurists who founded the four schools of Islamic Law, had many legitimate disagreements.

The sects that these verses are referring to did not base their internal cohesion and group identity on the clear essentials of faith, but rather on particular issues they overemphasised. In doing so, they had to ignore or marginalise other equally important aspects of their religion. Their group loyalty was not founded on positive work, but rather on conformity with their exclusive ideological focus. Every group did the same thing, and the religious community was broken up into rival sects, each belittling the teachings of the others. The fact that each group held to something of the truth, and

based their arguments on the scripture, made it all the easier for them to persist in their self-deception. Sectarian loyalty, in this way, replaced genuine religious identity.

This is an important lesson for us. Allah has warned the Muslims in a number of ways not to become like the people who were given the earlier scriptures. We are told not to allow our hearts to become like theirs had become. Allah says: “Is it not high time that the believers’ hearts should be humble for the remembrance of Allah and the Truth which has been revealed (to them), and that they should not become like those who were given the scripture before them, for whom long ages passed and their hearts grew hard?” [Sūrah al-Hadid: 16]

Likewise, Allah tells the Muslims not behave the way they had behaved in the pursuit of religious knowledge, saying: “You perceive them as being unified, but their hearts are divided. This is because they are a people bereft of sense.” [Sūrah al-Hashr: 14]

This type of dissension afflicts those whose faith has become weak, since Islam prohibits dissension. It also afflicts those whose intellects have grown weak, since reason dictates that the people of a faith community should remain united, bear their differences patiently, and work together to achieve spiritual and worldly good.

Setting Oneself Apart

The Qur'an and Sunnah come with teachings that distinguish the Muslims and provide them with a distinct identity. Muslims have religious practices and traditions that are uniquely their own. This is desirable, since it strengthens a Muslim's religious identity.

However, it is not desirable for some Muslims to set themselves apart from their fellow Muslims. Islam does not call for such behaviour except in two circumstances. The first circumstance is with respect to those Muslims who are openly deviant and proclaim their sinful behaviour publicly. It is necessary for other Muslims to distance themselves from those sinful Muslims and their wanton conduct. The second circumstance is when certain true teachings of Islam are being generally neglected by the people. It is desirable in that case to put those teachings into practice and revive them within the Muslim community.

As for deliberately acting differently than everyone else in matters that are not part of the Prophet's Sunnah, or exaggerating certain Islamic practices in order to create a distinction between Muslims on that basis, this is the type of fame-seeking that Islam prohibits. It can lead to divisions in society which are difficult to repair. Prophet Muhammad said: "Whoever dresses himself in the garments of fame and ostentation, Allah will dress him with garments of shame on the Day of Judgement." [Sunan Abī Dāwūd (4029) and Sunan Ibn Mājah (3606, 3607)]

The Pious Predecessors disliked ostentation, even in matters having a basis in Islamic teachings, but which are not well-known or strongly supported by the religious texts. They preferred to act in accordance with the practices of the general public as much as possible and disliked behaving in ways that set them apart. They tried to avoid anything that would make them seem conceited or give people the impression that they had a holier-than-thou attitude. They also wanted to avoid doing things that could sow dissension within society.

This attitude has been related from many of the leading scholars of Islam. Yahyā b. Ma`īn describes the renowned scholar Ahmad b Hanbal as follows:

I've never known anyone like Ahmad b. Hanbal. We stayed in his company for fifty years and never once did he pride himself over us for any act of piety or goodness. He also hated to dress ostentatiously. He used to say: "Blessed are those whom Allah allows to go unremembered."

Some Muslims are preoccupied with their particular loyalties and group identities to the detriment of their loyalty to the Muslim community as a whole. This causes them to exaggerate the importance of certain Islam teachings or give preference to less well-accepted opinions, by which they deliberately seek to set themselves apart from their fellow Muslims.

This is simply a form of ostentation, a way to assert one's pre-eminence over others. Such conduct should not be confused with doing a good deed publicly in order to set an example for others to

follow. That is just a form of encouragement. There are many opportunities for setting a good example which do not require acting conspicuously different from the broader community.

The Rights that Muslims Have Over One Another

Allah has established the bonds of brotherhood between the believers. The Prophet stressed this relationship on many occasions when he talked about the rights a Muslim has on other Muslims.

These rights can be broadly described as follows:

1. Rights on the Heart

This refers to the love and affection that Muslims must have for each other. Muslims should avoid being suspicious, and they should harbour no malice towards others in their hearts. They should share in each other's joys and sorrows. When they learn of someone's good fortune, it is an occasion to rejoice. Likewise, they should feel the pain of Muslims anywhere in the world who have been stricken by tragedy. Muslims should feel the pain when someone is struck down in the road, when women are being raped, or when a country is attacked or hit with a natural disaster.

A believing heart cannot help but feel this pain. Indeed, we feel the pain when any human being, regardless of their faith, is stricken by injustice or misfortune.

This grief and commiseration is the least of our obligations to people who are suffering. Allah has not commanded us to merely feel grief. However, such grief is the fuel that motivates people to act.

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "The believers, in their love, mercy and compassion for each other, are like a single body; if one part of it feels pain, the whole body responds to it with wakefulness and fever." [Sahīh al-Bukhārī (6011) and Sahīh Muslim (2586)]

The qualities of love, mercy and compassion are similar in meaning. There are various ways to understand the difference between them.

It might be understood that the difference between these feelings are related to the state of the one who experiences them. Love is an emotion felt in the heart for the other person. It is constant under changing circumstances. Mercy and compassion, by contrast, are felt towards the other person at times when that other person is in a state of weakness.

Alternatively, it might be said that we feel love for our family and friends, mercy for others whom we are able to help, and compassion for those whose misfortunes are beyond our capacity to help, people whom we can only reach out to with our hearts. In this case, there are three levels of feeling. The most particular is that of love. Mercy comes next, and compassion is the third in intensity. These are just two of the possible ways of distinguishing between the feelings of love, mercy, and compassion.

2. Rights on the Tongue

This includes returning the greeting of peace when somebody greets you. You should pray for Allah's mercy upon someone who sneezes. You should praise someone who does something deserving of praise. You should teach those who are ignorant. You must enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. You must beseech Allah for them in your prayers. You should speak words of love, friendship, and encouragement to one another.

These are all outward expressions of the feelings that you must cultivate in your heart. Supplication is not a minor thing. Allah might remove some affliction that the Muslims are facing on account of your prayer. Allah commands us in the Qur'an to pray to Him and tells us that He will answer our prayers. "Beseech Me in prayer. I will answer you." [Sūrah Ghāfir: 60]

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Supplication is worship." [Sunan al-Tirmidhī (2969) and Sunan Abī Dāwūd (1479)]

If nothing comes out of all these feelings and good words but a strong sense of belonging to the Muslim community, then that would be enough. A person cannot rightly claim to belong to this community and fail to share in any aspect of life with its other members, neither feeling joy at their success or sadness when

tragedy befalls them. These inner feelings need to be expressed by our words, or they will fade away in our hearts.

It is like the Prophet said: "A good word is a form of charity." Many people ask for no more than a word of support or encouragement. Sometimes a little commiseration is all they need. Someone who is stingy with words is a miser for sure. The least we can manage is to speak the truth publicly and offer prayers for our fellow Muslims when we are alone.

Today, the media and the virtual world of the Internet give us many opportunities to make a difference with our words and to impact positively on public opinion. It may be that an idea that begins on television, or on a website, or on Facebook, may ultimately have an effect on the policies of governments, international organizations, and humanitarian NGOs.

3. Rights on Wealth

This refers to the charity and Zakāh that are due of us. It also includes feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and fulfilling all the other rights that Allah has imposed upon the wealth of the Muslims. Allah says: "And in their wealth, the beggar and the needy have their rights." [Sūrah al-Dhāriyāt: 19]

Islamic scholars remind us that there are rights on money other than the prescribed Zakāt tax. There are times of hardship, poverty, and severe need when those who enjoy affluence must spend their wealth to support and assist their brothers and sisters in need.

Establishing an endowment is probably the most enduring and beneficial way to spend in charity, especially it is organized and managed judiciously, and conducted with transparency within an organizational framework. Endowments are effective ways to provide financial support for current and future projects. They can also provide the means to train and mobilize future generations to be productive and independent members of society, restoring their faith in themselves so that each of the 1.5 billion people who make up the total Muslim population can make a positive contribution to the world.

4. Rights on the Body

These include the rights others have on you to defend them when they are oppressed, secure their release when they are captives, provide relief for them when they are in desperation, and give to them all possible material assistance to fulfil their needs.

How the Muslim Community Became Divided

Anyone who studies the history of the Muslims – or looks at the present state of the Muslim world – can readily see that this great community is divided within itself in many different ways. Some of these divisions are natural and understandable, while others are false and reprehensible. Then there are divisions which may be acceptable in principle, but which have in many instances become exaggerated to the point where they jeopardise Muslim unity and the sense of brotherhood that believers are supposed to share.

The following are some of the most evident of these divisive factors:

1. Ideological and Juristic Schools of Thought

It is not a problem to merely identify with a particular school of thought. This can constitute part of an individual's personal identity, like the educational institution where someone studied, or the particular approach someone takes to resolving difficulties in matters of Islamic Law for his or her personal religious observances. The leading Islamic scholars of the past have given us a good example of how people can disagree academically without jeopardising their ties of friendship and love.

Identifying with a particular school of thought only becomes problematic if it develops into chauvinism and partisanship that weakens one's identification with the Muslim community as a whole. When it goes so far that the opinions expressed by the school of thought are given preference over the Qur'an and Sunnah, then it becomes truly reprehensible. Throughout Muslim history, there were many times when the school of thought people followed became the basis of religious identity. When they said: "I

am a Hanafi" or "I am a Mālikī" or "I am a Shāfi'i" or "I am a Hanbali", echoing the names of their schools' founders, they forgot that this was not an all-embracing identity, and that the only person a Muslim is obligated to follow in religion is Prophet Muhammad himself. It got to the point where scholars seriously discussed whether adherents of the different legal schools could marry one another!

Religious truth is not the monopoly of any school of thought. This cannot even be said for the four canonical schools of thought taken together. The totality and breadth of Islam cannot be contained within the narrow confines of these schools. History gives us many examples of people thinking beyond them. There were scholars who called to abandoning the schools of thought or who warned against chauvinism to any one of them. There are also numerous examples of leading scholars within each of the schools who criticised adherence to their school's recorded rulings instead of evidence and reasoned arguments.

For instance, the Mālikī scholar al-Mundhir b. Sa'īd al-Ballūtī declared: "I am clear of those who, when I ask for their proof, say: 'That is what Mālik or Ashhab or Sahnūn said.' When I mention something from the Qur'an, they say I am quarrelsome. When I quote them the words of the Prophet, they say Mālik did not deem that position to be correct."

The chauvinism he complained about was not exclusive to the Mālikī school of law. We read in one treatise on Hanafi legal theory: "Every statement in the sacred texts that contradicts with the (Hanafi) school of law is a text that has either been abrogated or has been rightly re-interpreted." [Usūl al-Sarakhsī]

Likewise, in a Shāfi'i treatise on legal theory we can read: "We declare that it is the duty of all Muslims and believing people to the far reaches of the east and west to adopt the Shāfi'i school of law." [al-Subkī, al-Ihbāj fī Sharh al-Minhāb]

We must certainly respect the four schools of law. They have provided the context for the study of Islamic Law throughout the Muslim world for more than ten centuries. In particular, the legal scholars whose teachings provided the foundation of those schools – Abū Hanīfah, Mālik, al-Shāfi'i, and Ahmad b. Hanbal – are fully deserving of the unanimous recognition they have received as

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leading scholars in the field. At the same time, we should never let our identification with any of these schools of law cause us to turn a blind eye to the correctness of other opinions, especially when it comes to the vital questions of our own day and time. We should never let our preference for a particular school of law interfere with how we relate to other people.

2. Race, Ethnicity and National Identity

People are naturally comfortable with others who share their cultural norms. The tendency to identify with one's people or nation is something Allah has placed in human nature and He has made it a reason for people to get to know each other. Allah has also told us that the superiority one person might have over another is based on a person's character, moral fibre, and piety, not race or ethnicity. On the Day of Judgment, our ethnic origins will mean nothing. Allah says: "And when the trumpet is blown, on that day there will be no kinship among them, nor will they ask of one another." [*Sūrah al-Mu'minūn*: 101]

Islam is a religion for everyone. It is not only for Arabs or people from a particular corner of the world. It is not for a particular race or sub-set of humanity, like the so-called "Afro-Asiatic" races, and it does not sanction racism. It just happens that the majority of Islam's adherents are in Africa and Asia. Every day, people around the world are embracing Islam. They come from Europe, Africa, Australia, and the Americas. They do not do so for material motives or political gain, but because they are convinced of Islam's truth and are drawn to the purity and simplicity of its message.

Dr. Jamal Hamdan, in 1990, estimated the total Muslim population at over 500 million, roughly one-seventh of the people on Earth. He also predicted that the Muslim population would rapidly grow to one-fifth of the world's population. His prediction came true. If anything, his estimate was low.

Racism and tribalism are old sicknesses that flare up time and again. In Prophet Muhammad's time, some Arabs chose to follow the false prophet Musaylimah because he came from their tribe, rather than follow Muhammad, who descended from the tribe of

Mudar. One of Musaylimah's followers openly said to him: "I bear witness that you are a liar and that Muhammad is telling the truth, but a liar from the tribe of Rabī` is better to me than an honest man from Mudar." Today, there are Arab nationalists who say regarding the Ba'ath National Socialist party: "I believe in the Ba'ath Party as my Lord without partner, and in the Arab race as my only religion." Indeed, one of the primary objectives of many nationalists was to counter the influence of Islamic tendencies in the Arab world.

It is not wrong for the Arabs to find dignity in their lineage and ethnicity. They were blessed to have the Prophet Muhammad among them and to have the Qur'an revealed in their language. It would be wrong for any Muslim to despise the Arabs as a whole. However, pride for one's lineage must stay within appropriate limits. Identification with one's ethnic group should never be coupled with arrogance or a sense of superiority over other people. Nor should it lead to isolationism or shunning interaction with people of different ethnicities.

The history of Islam was made by people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. From the earliest times there were Kurds, Persians, Turks, Indians, Berbers, and others who made a vital contribution. Today, there are Muslims of all ethnicities, and there is no problem with these people maintaining their ethnic identities. They can identify themselves accordingly and use this identification as an inspiration to excel in ways that benefit all humanity. By contrast, it is wrong for ethnic identity to become the basis for people to envision a separate future for themselves apart from the rest of humanity.

People are influenced by their governments and government policy into taking a stance for or against other people. The official and quasi-official news media in many countries play a crucial role in bringing about ethnic polarization and creating strained relations between various ethnic groups within a country, and sometimes even between families and individuals.

Yet, we find that broader identities endure, though weakly. They reveal themselves in times when one country or region is beset with a crisis or stricken by natural disasters. At these times, we see people from around the world coming together to give aid and support to those who are suffering.

Muslims must never permit themselves to make slurs or jokes about any ethnic group, race, or region of the world. We must avoid negative generalizations and stereotypes, like accusations that a certain people are stingy, cowardly, racist, haughty, or depraved. There is good and bad in everyone.

There is the famous saying: "Love for one's country is a part of faith." Though this is falsely attributed to the Prophet, it does express a natural tendency that human beings have, and one that can inspire loyalty and noble actions. We find in the Qur'an and Sunnah expressions showing favour to the cities of Mecca and Madinah, and to the lands of Arabia, Yemen, Syria, and Egypt, among others.

Those who claim that national pride is akin to idolatry are taking things too far. National pride, in and of itself, is something natural and praiseworthy. It is good for the people of a country to work together for their upliftment and do so in ways that are appropriate to their particular needs and secure the welfare of their citizens. Indeed, they can set a good example for others by doing so. National identity is part of a person's individual identity. It does not in any way negate a person's identifying as a Muslim, or with all of his or her fellow human beings. Allah says: "And He created the world for everyone." [Surah al-Rahmān: 10]

Islam did not come to sever ties. Instead, it came to uphold the rights of neighbours. Allah says: "(Show) kindness unto parents, and unto near kindred, and orphans, and the needy, and unto the neighbour who is of kin (unto you) and the neighbour who is not of kin" [Surah al-Nisā': 36]

3. Groups, Factions, and Political Movements

Allah calls upon us as human beings to work together. People are supposed to cooperate in wholesome endeavours to achieve the best results. We are called upon to enjoin one another to truth and patience while working for our mutual benefit. Consequently, it is correct for people with common goals and objective to organise their efforts so they can work more effectively, just like corporations do. What matters is that their goals and activities are ethical, legitimate and good. These objectives might concern matters of worldly benefit or simply shared interests. It is perfectly

natural for people to organize themselves in this way, and it often proves to be an important factor in the success of their efforts. Such behaviour strengthens social institutions and cements interpersonal relationships. It empowers different sectors of society so that they can protect their interests without causing harm to others.

Therefore, we must have a balanced attitude about group affiliation and political party membership. As long as it relates to that which is good and permissible, then it is no different that when someone identifies with a particular school of Islamic Law or ethnic group without exhibiting bigotry. On the other hand, if it relates to something sinful or unethical, or threatens social cohesion, then it is wrong and worthy of censure.

We should not summarily judge people on the basis of their party membership. We should not call them deviants or erroneous simply because they are affiliated with a certain group or cooperate with that group in some of its activities. We should certainly never allow our personal attitudes or dislike of a group cause us to try and destroy that group, ignore its legitimate concerns, or suspect its accomplishments. This is the attitude that you are "either with us or against us", and it is wrong.

People are to be judged on their personal merits as individuals. Allah says: "All who are in the heavens and the Earth will come to the Beneficent as a servant. Certainly He has a comprehensive knowledge of them and He has accounted for them all. And each one of them will come unto Him singly and alone on the Day of Resurrection." [Surah Maryam: 92-93]

No individual bears the sin of another. Everyone is culpable for their own actions. A good and upright person might belong to a group that has a lot of shortcomings, while a bad or disreputable person might belong to a respectable group.

The best of people are those who speak honestly and about good things, who avoid gossip and rumours, and who have no desire to pursue or expose the faults of others.

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exposing the (presumed) faults of their enemies, and pay no regard to their own development or to that of society as a whole.

Groups and factions are not uniform in their membership. They are loci of convergent opinion, and, like the community at large, contain those who are just and those who are unjust, virtuous people as well as sinners. The fierce disagreements that take place between Muslim groups squander their energies, compromising their writings, their media production, their policies, and their interpersonal relations.

Other communities, by contrast, have learned to accommodate disagreement, and they succeed in channelling their differences into positive action. For instance, the extreme right-wing and left-wing parties in the Israeli Knesset have become part of the broader society. They participate in the government or in the official opposition, and they contribute to the development of national policy. The state has managed to accommodate the full spectrum of political opinion, and uses their isolation in the region to their advantage to foster unity.

Likewise, the European Union has achieved a united currency and a standardised tariff policy. They engage in full-scale military and political cooperation and work together for their common security. They develop strategic plans for their mutual progress and shared ambitions. At the same time, the autonomy of each country and the will of its people are fully respected, and they are given a voice in developing their shared programs and projects.

In America, we see a very sensible circulation of power between the Democratic and Republican parties. This is carried out with considerable goodwill between the American people – after the election results are announced. No one holds a grudge against anyone else on account of their vote. They have strong and firmly established democratic institutions, which in spite of their shortcomings, are capable of compensating for the inevitable mistakes and missteps of policymakers, as well as triumphing over the crises and challenges that the country faces, including crises as serious as the September 11 atrocities and Hurricane Katrina.

These are nations which have succeeded in developing sound policies and systems for governing their differences, drawn from their experience, history, practical knowledge, and accumulated

wisdom. The Islamic world deserves to be guided by all of these factors from within its own historical legacy as well as from the experience of other nations, in consideration of the moderate teachings of the Qur'an and the concern that our Prophet had for his community's welfare.

We have a right to dream that the Muslim world, with all of its countries, ethnicities, and ideological currents, can unite upon its common interests, or at least draw closer together. It may seem to be a distant dream, but Allah is capable of all things. Are we prepared to accept that people will have various identities and affiliations, and work against bigotry, racism, selfishness, and factional interests? This is the challenge we must be prepared to face. It is certainly a difficult one, but it is far from insurmountable. If we rely upon Allah, we will find He is enough for us. As we say in each and every one of our prayers: "You alone we worship, and Your help alone we seek." [Sūrah al-Fatihah: 5]

Disagreement is Natural

Allah has made the existence of differences a reality of life. Even parents and their children differ, though the children are their parents' immediate descendants, and were raised by them from infancy. They differ in their outlook on life, their personalities, their temperaments, and even their physical appearances. In fact, sexual reproduction and the exchange of the parents' genetic material that it entails guarantees that children will be different.

Allah says: "And from among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the Earth and the differences in your colours and tongues." [Sūrah al-Rūm: 22]

The differences between people's complexions is one of the most obvious of differences. Our various colours are a sign of Allah's creative power, and a manifestation of His wisdom. At the same time, skin colour has proven to be a trial for many who have used this superficial difference as a criterion for judging others.

As for the differences in our tongues, there are a number of possible interpretations. This can be understood to refer to our various languages. It can also be understood to refer to the differences in people's vocal qualities and speaking skills. It can also refer to the content of people's discourse, whether pleasant or abusive, optimistic or despondent, ethical or wanton.

This verse appears in *Sūrah al-Rūm*, the chapter of the Qur'an entitled "Romans". This chapter opens with a discussion about the most virulent manifestation of human differences: war, particularly the war which was raging at the time between the world's two great powers: Byzantine Rome and the Persian Empire. This discussion then opens up into a broader examination of the differences between the fortunes of nations and a promise that the Muslims - who were at that time weak and downtrodden - will have a brighter future: "And on that day the believers will rejoice with Allah's help." [Sūrah al-Rūm: 4-5]

This is immediately followed by a description of how civilizations have their time of ascendency and weakness, and how the balance of power shifts over historical time: "Do they not travel

through the Earth, and observe what was the end of those who came before them, those who had been superior to them in strength?" [Sūrah al-Rūm: 9]

This thematic development comes to its most poignant example by addressing the different fates that await people in the Hereafter: "And at the time when the hour shall come, at that time they shall become separated one from the other." [Sūrah al-Rūm: 14]

With each example of difference, the Qur'an counterpoints Allah's divine unity with the variety and changes that exist in His Creation. This applies even to the subject of time. Allah says: "Therefore glory be to Allah when you enter upon the night and when you arise in the morning. And praise be to Him in the heavens and the Earth, and at nightfall, and when you find yourselves at midday." [Sūrah al-Rūm: 17-18]

Following this focus on time is a thematic treatment of place, and then of the alternation of life and death, which is concluded with reference to the variety that exists within the human species: "Among His signs is that He created you from dust; and then, behold, you are human beings scattered (far and wide)! [Sūrah al-Rūm: 20]

This moves to a focus on the differences within the human entity on the most intimate level: "And among His Signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts." [Sūrah al-Rūm: 21]

The verses progress from the heavens and the Earth through the variety that exists in Creation, and arrives in a very satisfying manner to the sweetness of human intimacy. There is a parallel treatment of the heavens and Earth on the one hand and the complementary relationship between a man and woman within the context of marriage on the other, highlighting what both of these relationships entail of stability and creative potential.

It is in this context that the discussion arrives at the differences between people's colours and tongues, and then moves on to the alternation of the night and the day, through other manifestations of the differences within Creation, culminating in praising those

people for whom this great variety becomes an affirmation of faith in the oneness and wisdom of their Creator.

Throughout *Sūrah al-Rūm*, the theme of “difference” in Creation is employed purposefully to affirm monotheism and establish faith, and in an eloquent rhetorical turn, to negate disagreement and dissension in how people should relate to their Lord: “Turn back to Him in repentance, and fear Him. Establish regular prayers, and be not among those who join gods with Allah, those who split up their religion, and become mere sects, each party rejoicing in that which is with itself!” [*Sūrah al-Rūm*: 31-32]

This chapter of the Qur'an mobilizes an impressive range of examples – even invoking the stages of the human life from infancy through adulthood to old age – to achieve its rhetorical aim. It affirms that change and variation are part of the divine plan in Creation, and that these phenomena ultimately attest to the unity and absolute wisdom of the Creator.

Though disagreement is natural to the human condition, people are clearly discomfited by it. How often have we heard these plaintive questions: When will people stop disagreeing with each other? How long will they persist in disagreeing on this issue or that?

The answer is: Disagreement will remain part of life until Allah inherits the Earth and everyone on it. We should not nurture the hope that people will come to some global consensus. It is Allah's wisdom that disagreements and differences exist in this world. The alternative, absolute uniformity, would not only be tiresome, but completely unrewarding for human life. Allah tells us: “...but they will not cease to disagree.” [*Sūrah Hūd*: 118] This verse tells us that disagreement is something Allah has decreed for our world. It is a reality of life, and an inexorable part of human nature.

Can Disagreement Ever be Dispelled?

If you think that greater access to knowledge, or education, or stronger faith, or plain honesty will bring an end to disagreement, think again. You will find the most knowledgeable of people, the greatest religious scholars, and the most sincere, unbiased individuals, disagreeing among themselves.

Consider the disagreements that Prophet Muhammad's Companions had with each other. Even during the Prophet's lifetime, there were disputes. On one occasion, a feud erupted between the inhabitants of two adjacent neighbourhoods in Madinah inhabited by the clan of Banū 'Amr b. 'Awf. The Prophet (peace be upon him) spent so much time brokering a reconciliation between them that he was delayed in going to the the congregational prayer and Abū Bakr led the prayer instead. [*Sahīh al-Bukhārī* (684) and *Sahīh Muslim* (421)]

At the time of the Prophet's death, the Muslims experienced their first great controversy, disagreeing about who should lead them. The native inhabitants of Madinah nominated Sa`d b. 'Ubādah after conferring together in the assembly room of Banū Sā'idah. Afterwards, the Companions agreed to appoint Abū Bakr as the leader of the Muslims, after learning about the Prophet's indication that the person to lead them should be from the tribe of Quraysh.

When the wars of apostasy broke out in Arabia during Abū Bakr's reign, there was considerable disagreement regarding whether it was permissible to fight against all of the breakaway rebel tribes or only those tribes which openly denounced Prophet Muhammad. Abū Bakr was resolved to fight against all the rebellious tribes, and was ultimately able to persuade the other leading Companions, including 'Umar, that his policy was correct. He thereby succeeded in uniting the Muslims in the cause against the apostate rebels.

This was the case with a number of crises and challenges that the Muslim community faced during the era of the Companions. At first, they disagreed and then, usually in major issues, they were ultimately able to arrive at a consensus. As for disagreements on legal matters and the finer points of religious knowledge where there is no clear or decisive evidence, those disagreements persisted. If disagreement was normal for the best generation of Muslims, how can it not be the case for those who came after them?

Even if we concede, for argument's sake, that sincerity coupled with greater religious knowledge will lead to the resolution of all disagreements, this only assures us that disagreements will be on the rise! People, taken as a whole, will always be subject to incomplete

knowledge and to outright ignorance. There will always be those who are weak of understanding, or insincere, or biased. Prophet Muhammad told us: "Each generation will be better than the one that comes after it, until the day you return to your Lord." [Sahih al-Bukhārī (7068)]

At the same time, some people have a predilection for controversy, relishing disagreement for its own sake, regardless of whether or not there is a legitimate basis for it. This is not the right attitude to have. Disagreements cause tension and should not be sought after or capitalised upon for trivial reasons. When someone has a disagreement with a classmate, co-worker, relative, or neighbour on some matter, consider how often it leads to a lawsuit, or to their estrangement.

People can become part of a controversy simply by quoting the opinion of this person and the disagreement of that person. They can become preoccupied with some minor point of debate at the expense of more serious and relevant matters that deserve their attention.

There is a story about the great jurist and legal scholar Ahmad b. Hanbal which illustrates this point nicely:

A young man named Abū Ja`far Ahmad b. Habbān al-Qatī`i approached Ahmad b. Hanbal and asked him: "Can I perform ritual ablutions with limestone-saturated water?"

Ahmad replied: "I dislike this practice."

The young man then asked: "Can I perform my ritual ablutions with the runoff water from soaking beans?"

Again, Ahmad replied: "I dislike this practice."

The young man then asked: "Can I perform my ritual ablutions with water infused with safflower?"

Yet again, Ahmad replied: "I dislike this practice."

At this point, the student got up to leave. Ahmad, gently tugged on his shirt to bid him to stay. Then he asked the young man: "Do you know the supplication you should say when you enter the mosque?"

The man remained silent.

Then Ahmad asked: "Do you know the supplication you should say when you leave the mosque?" Again, the young man could not answer.

Then Ahmad said: "Go and learn these things."

Ahmad showed his understanding of interpersonal dealings by politely answering all of the young man's questions before doing anything else. These questions were all about uncertain matters where no one's opinion was sure to be correct. They were not essential, inviolable religious teachings.

The way Ahmad answer was quite telling. He chose his words carefully, saying: "I dislike this practice." This humility is reminiscent of another great jurists way of answering, Abū Hanīfah, who used to say: "This is my opinion. It is the best I can come up with, if anyone comes with something better, I will give up this opinion for that better one."

Finally, Ahmad used a very tactful and indirect approach to explain to the young man that it is wrong for a novice student of religion to be preoccupied with controversial trivialities. This is why Ahmad waited for the young man to finish with all of his questions, then gently tugged his shirt when he showed his readiness to leave. He asked the young man relevant questions about the supplications he needed to be aware of. When the young man could not answer, Ahmad did not scold him. He just told the man that needed to go and learn these things. In this gentlest of ways, Ahmad was actually telling the young man: "Do not pursue controversial and contentious issues. You are not qualified for that. Busy yourself for the time being with practical matters that will help you practice your religion, until you reach the level of an advanced student."

One of the indispensable skills a scholar or student of knowledge must have is to be able to gauge the proper value of things, to know what is important and what is trivial.

It is as the Qur'an says: "And for all things Allah has appointed a due proportion." [Sūrah al-Talāq: 3]

Coping with What is Less than Ideal

Prophet Muhammad said: "You will follow in the ways of those who came before you, inch by inch, yard by yard, so that even if they were to go into a lizard's burrow, you would follow them into it."

His Companions asked him: "Do you mean the Jews and Christians?"

He replied: "Who else?" [Sahīb al-Bukhārī (7320) and Sahīb Muslim (2669)]

Here the Prophet is foretelling how Muslims will start acting contrary to Islamic teachings more and more as time goes on. By informing his followers of this, he makes that eventuality less difficult for the people who will live to witness it, and easier for them to cope with. They will understand what is going on, and therefore suffer less from stress and anxiety. They will, as a result, act sensibly and properly gauge how much they can expect from the people. They will appreciate the fact that they do not live in the Prophet's time. This does not mean that they will accept the falsehood going on around them, but rather that they will be gentle and patient in the way they work to correct things, and not insist upon an idealistic vision that is out of touch with reality.

Moreover, they will recognise that what they are witnessing was accurately foretold by the Prophet and is therefore a sign of his prophethood. Allah says: "When the believers saw the confederate forces (assembled against them), they said: 'This is that which Allah and His Messenger promised us. What Allah and His Messenger told us is true.' It only confirmed them in their faith and submission." [Sūrah al-Ahzāb: 22]

Prophet Muhammad used to inform his secretary, Hudhayfah b. al-Yamān, of the tribulations that were to come. Hudhayfah later recalled: "When one of those things happened, I would recognize it after having forgotten all about it, just like when you see the face of someone you have forgotten about, you immediately know who that person is."

Hudhayfah would say on those occasions: "My dear friend had spoken truly." Other Companions had similar experiences.

If we study the present day in careful detail with reference to the many Prophetic reports that talk about future times, we will notice things about the state of the world that escape other people's attention. The Prophet only spoke about the future so that later generations would be forewarned and avoid the pitfalls that awaited them.

We need to understand the difference between what Allah decrees to happen in the word and what He has prescribes for us to do when it happens. They are two different things. This is why a believer never uses Allah's decree as an excuse to avoid responsibility or to be heedless of the wrongdoing that goes on in the world. We know that the Prophet meant to warn us against that wrongdoing, and this will make us all the more steadfast.

Therefore, the Prophet's foretelling of these events has a two-fold benefit. On the one hand, it gives us fortitude in the face of adversity. We do not grow despondent or feel the need to retreat from the world and its people. We will, instead, see the best in the people around us, recognise the situation for what it is, and work to make things better. On the other hand, we will be able to avoid the pitfalls that the people have stumbled into, because we have been forewarned. This is why the Prophet promised such a great reward for those who are able to hold fast to the true path when the community becomes corrupted.

This provides a further, crucial lesson for those who wish to engage in reform and the betterment of society. We realise how important it is to understand the world around us, with all its political, economic, and social realities on the local, regional, and global levels. If we attempt to institute hasty reforms without properly considering the people's culture, level of understanding, and tolerance for change, we are going to make a mess of things. Furthermore, we will make an unfair assessment of the people, assuming that they are simply hostile and governed by base self-interest, and fail to see the considerable goodness that they have within them. In turn, we will become unjust in the way we treat them. This is why sensitivity to the circumstances and culture of the people is inseparable from the task of calling them to what is right.

Speaking to his Companions about the difficult days future generations will face, Prophet Muhammad said: "Those who work

for good in those times will have the reward of fifty people doing the same work."

They said: "Do you mean they will get the blessings of fifty people from their time, or the blessings of fifty of us?"

He answered: "I mean they will get the blessings of fifty of you." [Sunan al-Tirmidhi (3058), Sunan Abi Dawud (4341), and Sunan Ibn Majah (4014)]

Likewise, he said: "There will come a time when being steadfast in faith will be as difficult as holding a burning coal in your hand." [Sunan al-Tirmidhi (66)]

Here the Prophet is encouraging patience and fortitude for those who live in a time when most people will be acting contrary to what is right. This is the most that can be hoped from a believer. Personalities differ, and many people find it very difficult to remain aloof to what is going on around them while remaining actively engaged in society.

This is why, when the Prophet was asked what kind of people are better, he replied: "The believers who strive with their persons and wealth for the sake of Allah." Then, when they asked him who was next in rank, he answered: "Those who withdraw from society to worship their Lord, and eschew their people's wicked ways." [Sahih al-Bukhari (2786) and Sahih Muslim (1888)]

Here, the Prophet gives preference to those who strive with their persons and their wealth for Allah's sake while actively engaging in society: calling people to the truth, imparting knowledge, helping the poor and indigent, and redressing injustice.

Then, for those whose hearts cannot cope with such circumstances, the next best thing for them to do is keep their distance and protect themselves. This does not mean that they cut themselves off from society completely. They are not supposed to leave off congregational prayer in the mosque, or places of learning or family gatherings that they must attend to maintain proper ties of kinship, or live without friends. What it means is that they stay away from superfluous activities which will expose them unnecessarily to sin and distress.

In this context, the Prophet said: "Soon there will come a time when the people's state will become confused and entangled, and

the worst of them will endure, their affairs and trusts will be indistinguishable, like this." and he interlaced the his fingers of his two hands.

The People asked him: "What should we do when that happens?"

He answered: "Hold firmly to what you know, eschew what is condemnable, stick closely with one another (on the truth), and avoid the general masses." [Musnad Ahmad (7063)]

Between Scripture & Intent

The Banū Qurayzah expedition is the classic example of a disagreement between the Companions on a matter of Islamic practice. Prophet Muhammad had sent a number of Companions to the Banū Qurayzah settlement on the outskirts of Madinah, and ordered: "No one should pray the afternoon prayer until after they reach Banū Qurayzah." [Sahih al-Bukhari (2692) and Sahih Muslim (2605)]

The settlement was not all that far from Madinah, lying approximately at the outskirts of the city. It would not difficult for people to reach it in a reasonably short time. However, many people were being sent on the expedition and they would have to make preparations, which could lead to some people being delayed. Not everyone would arrive at the same time.

The Companions understood different things from the Prophet's command. Some of them took his words literally and resolved not to pray the afternoon prayer until their arrival, even if it meant delaying the prayer until after the timeframe for offering it had elapsed. Others interpreted the Prophet's words as indicating the haste in which he wanted them to undertake the expedition. What he meant was that they should hurry up and get to Banū Qurayzah in time to offer the afternoon prayer there, and not stop on the way. He did not intend for them to neglect offering the afternoon prayer on time.

This is the most well-known example of the Companions disagreeing on the meaning of a prophetic statement during the Prophet's lifetime. It is important because the Prophet became aware of their disagreement, and it was a matter that had practical

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Here the Prophet is encouraging patience and fortitude for those who live in a time when most people will be acting contrary to what is right. This is the most that can be hoped from a believer. Personalities differ, and many people find it very difficult to remain aloof to what is going on around them while remaining actively engaged in society.

This is why, when the Prophet was asked what kind of people are better, he replied: "The believers who strive with their persons and wealth for the sake of Allah." Then, when they asked him who was next in rank, he answered: "Those who withdraw from society to worship their Lord, and eschew their people's wicked ways." [Sahih al-Bukhari (2786) and Sahih Muslim (1888)]

Here, the Prophet gives preference to those who strive with their persons and their wealth for Allah's sake while actively engaging in society: calling people to the truth, imparting knowledge, helping the poor and indigent, and redressing injustice.

Then, for those whose hearts cannot cope with such circumstances, the next best thing for them to do is keep their distance and protect themselves. This does not mean that they cut themselves off from society completely. They are not supposed to leave off congregational prayer in the mosque, or places of learning or family gatherings that they must attend to maintain proper ties of kinship, or live without friends. What it means is that they stay away from superfluous activities which will expose them unnecessarily to sin and distress.

In this context, the Prophet said: "Soon there will come a time when the people's state will become confused and entangled, and

the worst of them will endure, their affairs and trusts will be indistinguishable, like this." and he interlaced the his fingers of his two hands.

The People asked him: "What should we do when that happens?"

He answered: "Hold firmly to what you know, eschew what is condemnable, stick closely with one another (on the truth), and avoid the general masses." [Musnad Ahmad (7063)]

Between Scripture & Intent

The Banū Qurayzah expedition is the classic example of a disagreement between the Companions on a matter of Islamic practice. Prophet Muhammad had sent a number of Companions to the Banū Qurayzah settlement on the outskirts of Madinah, and ordered: "No one should pray the afternoon prayer until after they reach Banū Qurayzah." [Sahih al-Bukhari (2692) and Sahih Muslim (2605)]

The settlement was not all that far from Madinah, lying approximately at the outskirts of the city. It would not difficult for people to reach it in a reasonably short time. However, many people were being sent on the expedition and they would have to make preparations, which could lead to some people being delayed. Not everyone would arrive at the same time.

The Companions understood different things from the Prophet's command. Some of them took his words literally and resolved not to pray the afternoon prayer until their arrival, even if it meant delaying the prayer until after the timeframe for offering it had elapsed. Others interpreted the Prophet's words as indicating the haste in which he wanted them to undertake the expedition. What he meant was that they should hurry up and get to Banū Qurayzah in time to offer the afternoon prayer there, and not stop on the way. He did not intend for them to neglect offering the afternoon prayer on time.

This is the most well-known example of the Companions disagreeing on the meaning of a prophetic statement during the Prophet's lifetime. It is important because the Prophet became aware of their disagreement, and it was a matter that had practical

implications for Islamic worship. Nevertheless, the Prophet never declared either group to be right or wrong.

It might be said that this is the foundation of the most fundamental difference that exists between Islamic legal scholars with respect to interpreting the scripture. It is possible to divide the many schools of Islamic Law into two general categories: the literalist school and the purposive school.

The literalist school endeavours to take scriptural statements on their face value. Matters of religious belief and praxis must be based upon what the texts explicitly state. Those who adhere to this approach do not dismiss the wisdom and rationales that exist behind the various scriptural injunctions, nor do they deny how those injunctions seek to ensure humanity's wellbeing and protect people from harm. They are willing to apply the general rulings specified in the scriptures to new situations by way of analogy, on the basis of the rationales for which those rulings were set forth in the scriptures. Historically, there were some scholars who took the literalist approach to its logical conclusions, denying the validity of finding rationales for legal rulings and thereby categorically rejecting the use of analogous reasoning to derive laws. However, they were few in number, the most famous of them being Ibn Hazm and Dāwūd al-Zāhirī.

As for the purposive school, they focus their investigations on the purposes of Islamic Law and the rationales behind the rulings, while being respectful of the scriptural evidence and being careful not to contradict the sacred texts. They pay particular attention to why the texts say what they say, and apply this understanding in cases of apparent contradictions between the texts, or when there is a matter of clear human welfare which is better served by favouring somewhat weaker textual evidence or a less obvious but valid interpretation. They also show a greater concern for the effect that context has on meaning. The application of this approach leads to the formulation of general legal axioms as well as overarching principles for addressing political, economic, and social concerns. It also allows for creative responses to new and complex situations which do not have a clear precedent in the sacred texts, and where the relevance of particular established legal rulings may be unclear.

These two approaches are what divides the famous schools of Islamic Law, though many individual jurists of the various schools combine between them in practice.

As for the Companions, they were known to exercise juristic discretion when faced with new problems and difficulties. They were willing to apply the meaning of different texts to different situations, or to leave acting upon the restricted indication of a single text in favour of a general axiom derived from the cumulative meaning of a number of other texts. Only the most erudite, insightful, and sincere of jurists can use such an approach. The second Caliph of Islam, 'Umar b. al-Khattāb, was particularly noted for it. We see it in how he exempted thieves from capital punishment during the year of famine, how he stopped using the general welfare fund to give grants to people whose hearts were being won over to Islam, and how he did away with the punishment of exile for people found guilty of fornication. These are but a few examples of his approach to major issues of public policy.

Determining Who is Right and Wrong

There is another good example of a disagreement between two Companions about a practical matter of Islamic worship, but one in which the Prophet identified who was right.

These two Companions were travelling on an errand the Prophet had sent them on. It was time for prayer, and they had no water for ritual ablutions, so they made dry ablutions instead, and offered their prayers. This is due to the injunction in the Qur'an: "If you are ill or on a journey, or any of you has answered the call of nature, or you have been in sexual contact with women, and you find no water, then perform dry ablutions with clean earth." [Sūrah al-Mā'idah: 6]

After praying, the two of them continued on their journey. After a while, they came upon a source of water. The time for the prayer had not yet expired, and they disagreed about what they should do. One of them decided to perform ablutions and offer his prayer over again. The other decided that the prayer he had performed was valid and should not be repeated.

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When they returned from their journey, they went to the Prophet and told him about what they had done. The Prophet turned to the one who had repeated his prayer and said: "You have the blessings for your prayer twice over." Then he turned to the one who did not repeat his prayer, and said: "You have correctly ascertained the proper practice, and your prayer obligations are fulfilled." [Sunan Abī Dāwūd (338) and Sunan al-Nasā'i (1/213)]

We should take a lesson from how gently the Prophet spoke to these two people, affirming them both in their disagreement and their exercise of judgment, and not rebuking either of them. If these two people were brought before many students of Islamic Law today, we would hear a different tone altogether. We can imagine their answers. One of them would certainly say: "How did you think you could offer the same exact obligatory prayer twice in one day? That is patently false! Allah has prescribed five obligatory prayers a day, not six." Then he would go on listing all the negative consequences that are implicit in what he had done.

What did the Prophet say to the man who repeated his prayer? "You have the blessings for your prayer twice over." Then he turned to the other man and confirmed that he was right for not repeating his prayer.¹

Similar disagreements have come up between Islamic legal scholars of later generations, and we find their differences with each other to have been amicable. One of these is whether "In the Name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful" is a verse of *Sūrah al-Fātiḥah*, or a separate verse on its own, like it is for other chapters of the Qur'an. This question is important with regard to religious practice, since this opening chapter of the Qur'an is read in every unit of prayer. Nevertheless, none of the scholars who uphold that it is a verse have ever turned to the others and accused them of falsely rejecting a verse of the Qur'an, nor have they said that the prayer of one who omits this verse is unacceptable. In turn, none of those scholars ever turned to the others and said: "How dare you add an

additional verse to a chapter of the Qur'an which is not a part of it?" They all recognised that this disagreement is reasonable, and that there is room for more than one opinion.

There are so many other examples like this one, like how and when a prayer should be shortened, or how long a journey must be before it is permitted for a traveller to shorten the prayer, or whether a person must pray both the 'Id prayer and the Jumu'ah prayer if 'Id falls on a Friday. Today, we have newer questions, like when a person should offer the night prayer in the summer near the poles where the Sun never sets.

Regarding the story of the Banū Qurayzah expedition, we can observe that the Prophet never identified which group of Companions were right. This is why Muslim legal scholars have been debating the issue ever since. Some of them support those who stopped on the way and offered their afternoon prayers on time. They argue that these Companions succeeded in praying on time as well as in hurrying to their destination, obeying both the general command to pray on time as well as the intent of the Prophet's specific command to hurry to their destination.

Other jurists argue that those who postponed their prayer were correct, because they obeyed the Prophet's specific instruction to the letter. This disagreement is as old as Islam and is just as strong today as it ever was, but it is not a problem for anyone.

Perhaps this is why the Prophet refrained from telling us who was right. He wanted to establish that disagreements of this kind are an acceptable and unavoidable part of life, and that it is not always necessary to know for certain who is right and who is wrong.

Examples of the Companions' Disagreement

It is well established that 'Umar did not regard dry ablutions as a valid form of ritual purification for a traveller in a state of major ritual impurity. He believed that a person in this state had to refrain from offering formal prayers until performing a full ritual bath with water, even if the person has to wait ten years to find enough water. He was not alone among the Prophet's leading Companions in thinking this way. Ibn Mas'ūd also held this view.

¹ The hadith has a slight weakness in its chain of transmission. Al-Nasā'i and al-Dāraqutnī narrate it with a gap in its chain of transmission, and this is considered to be the more likely chain of transmission for the hadith. Refer to *Sharh Bulugh al-Maram* (3/1221).

The rest of the Companions disagreed strongly with this opinion. They had good reason to do so, for it says in the Qur'an: "If you are ill or on a journey, or any of you has answered the call of nature, or you have been in sexual contact with women, and you find no water, then perform dry ablutions with clean earth." [*Sūrah al-Nisā'*: 43 and *Sūrah al-Mā'idah*: 6]

This verse lists the causes for minor ritual impurity which require ablutions with water, as well as the cause for major ritual impurity – sexual relations – which requires a full ritual bath. It also states that dry ablutions are a substitute for all of these listed occurrences when water is unavailable.

Ibn Mas'ūd saw things differently. He saw the concession for dry ablutions as applying only to cases of minor ritual impurity. Furthermore, he argued: "If we allow this concession for the people, it is likely that they will make dry ablutions instead of bathing whenever they find that the water is too cold."

Not only is his opinion at variance to the apparent meaning of the Qur'anic verse, it is also contrary to the Prophet's established Sunnah. Ultimately, it became a point of unanimous juristic consensus that, in the absence of water, dry ablutions can be used in lieu of a ritual bath.

The important thing here is that the vast majority of the Companions did not accept 'Umar's view, in spite of his status and the great respect that he commanded. Indeed, the second Caliph of Islam was so awe-inspiring among his peers, that they would sometimes refrain from voicing their contrary opinions. Ibn 'Abbās disagreed with 'Umar on a point relating to the laws of inheritance, but he never voiced his disagreement while 'Umar was alive. When asked about this, Ibn 'Abbās said: "'Umar commanded great respect, and I respected him.' " Ibn 'Abbās did not, however, adopt 'Umar's position.

Indeed, we can see how the Companions were able to negotiate this kind of disagreement from two angles. On the one hand, they did not accept or adopt a weak opinion. On the other, they did not lose respect for a knowledgeable and qualified person simply because that person expressed a weak opinion. Someone who is known for sincerity, understanding and extensive knowledge should not be derided for an occasional weak viewpoint. It must be

assumed that they arrived at their opinion through the exercise of careful deliberations and due diligence, and not on the basis of a whim.

Another example of disagreement among the Companions refers to Zakāh al-Fitr, the donation of food that is given to the poor at the end of the month of fasting. Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī gives the following account:

Back when Allah's Messenger was alive, we used to pay Zakāh al-Fitr on behalf of every member of our household, young and old, free and slave, as four double-handfuls of flour, dried milk, barley, dates, or raisins. We continued to do like this until (the Caliph) Mu'awiyah came to perform pilgrimage and addressed the people from the pulpit: "I believe that two double handfuls as assessed in Samarra in Syria equals your four-handful measure of dates."

Thereafter, the people adopted this practice. As for me, I will continue paying it the old way for the rest of my life. [*Sahīh al-Bukhārī* (1508) and *Sahīh Muslim* (985)]

Mu'awiyah's opinion was adopted by a number of Companions and Successors, as well as some of the leading jurists. It has been back-attributed to the four rightly-guided Caliphs, and even related as if it were a statement of the Prophet.

A third example is Mu'awiyah's opinion regarding the imposition of the Qur'an's mandatory, prescribed shares of inheritance between Muslims and their non-Muslim relatives.² Most scholars say that this kind of inheritance does not operate between people of different religions, because Prophet Muhammad said: "A Muslim does not inherit from a nonbeliever, and a nonbeliever does not inherit from a Muslim." [*Sahīh al-Bukhārī* (6764) and *Sahīh Muslim* (1614)]

² As for inheritance stipulated freely as a bequest in a will, scholars agree that this takes place between Muslims and non-Muslims.

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Mu`āwiyah believed that Muslims should inherit automatically from non-Muslim relatives according to the statutory shares prescribed by Islamic Law. He argued that disallowing this kind of inheritance might discourage some people from accepting Islam, because they would be afraid of being disinherited by their non-Muslim relatives. They might at the very least postpone accepting Islam until after their parents died to ensure they would have access to their parents' estate. Therefore, Mu`āwiyah believed that in order to encourage conversion, the person should be ensured the stipulated share of inheritance from his or her parents. Some of the Successors adopted Mu`āwiyah's view.

Another ruling in which the Caliph Mu`āwiyah disagreed with other Companions pertains to selling gold and silver jewellery for a greater weight of gold and silver bullion or coin. In Islamic commercial law, gold is not supposed to be traded for gold of a different weight, and silver is not to be traded for silver of a different weight, due to the usury that it entails. Mu`āwiyah believed that this did not apply to the purchase of gold and silver jewellery, since value has been added to the commodity by it being crafted into jewellery. This opinion was adopted centuries later by the eminent Hanbalī jurists Ibn Taymiyah and Ibn al-Qayyim.

These are but a few of the legal questions about which the Companions differed after the death of Prophet Muhammad. In fact, sometimes their disagreements involved matters of belief, albeit only questions of secondary importance. One of these questions is whether Prophet Muhammad saw his Lord during his ascension into heaven. Most of the Companions held the view that he did not see Allah with his naked eyes. A few Companions, including Ibn `Abbās, believed that he did. This has continued to be a point of disagreement among Muslims.

Another question of belief is whether a Muslim is punished in the grave due to the wailing of family members. `Umar related a hadīth to that effect. However, `Ā'ishah disagreed strongly with `Umar and explained that he had misheard the Prophet. Then she cited the verse from the Qur'an which reads: "No soul earns (evil) but against itself, and no bearer of burdens shall bear the burden of another." [Sūrah al-An`ām: 164]

She also objected to someone narrating that the Prophet allegedly addressed the dead, calling out to particular people and saying: "Have you found what Allah and His Messenger had promised you to be true?" She explained that he had really said: "Indeed, now you have come to know that what I had been telling you is true." Then she recited two verses from the Qur'an which confirm that the dead cannot hear what the living say to them: "Indeed, you cannot make the dead hear you." [Sūrah al-Naml: 80] and: "You cannot bring those in the graves to hear." [Sūrah Fātir: 22]

The Companions accepted the fact that they disagreed on these and other similar issues relating to faith. There is nothing to indicate that they were troubled by the existence of this disagreement. It was fine, as long as their differences were founded in what Allah had revealed, and did not transgress into unfounded innovations or directly contradict the unambiguous pronouncements of the Qur'an and authentic Sunnah. We never hear any Companion censuring or rebuking another for expressing a different view. At the same time, if the opinion was weakly backed by evidence, we do not see the other Companions adopting it, regardless of the prestige of the one who advocated it, even if that person was the Caliph. Although the other Companions did not adopt their views, they never belittled their status or their reputations either.

The Companions were not intolerant. Intolerance comes from believing that one possesses the absolute truth to the exclusion of everyone else, and this leads to abusing others who do not share one's point of view. It blinds one to the uncertainties that exist, and this causes one to question the sincerity and motives of those who disagree.

By looking at the disagreements the Companions had with each other, we realise that disagreement is inevitable. It is impossible to expect everyone to come to an agreement on every debatable issue. The reason I am emphasising this point so much is that one well-known Muslim scholar has been saying it is possible to get all Muslims to agree on everything, even on secondary rulings of Islamic Law. It seems that he believes all we need to do is determine the authenticity of all the Prophetic hadīth, and through

doing so, then the whole Muslim community can be brought together in following those hadith which are proven to be authentic.

This is a very strange claim to make. The fact that such an odd statement was made by such a prominent and learned scholar shows us just how inevitable it is that we are going to disagree. If this kind of thinking can come from one of the most erudite scholars of the day, what can we expect from those of a lesser stature?

Islamic scholars will never agree on which hadith are authentic. They disagree regarding the very conditions for determining that authenticity. They disagree about the conditions for verifying the qualifications of hadith narrators. They differ as to how and to what extent various corroborating narrations strengthen each other. They have differing views as to how to identify hidden defects in transmission and how to weigh various narrations against each other. They vary in what kinds of gaps in transmission, if any, they are willing to tolerate. These differences are likely to remain until the end of time, and they only relate to one aspect of determining Islamic legal rulings. There is no way that all Muslims are going to become united behind a single way of thinking.

Disagreements between Islamic Scholars

Scholars are at the head of the Muslim community when it comes to matters of religious knowledge. Nevertheless, they have disagreements with each other, just like everyone else. There are many reasons why they disagree. These reasons are an important topic of research about which many treatises and books have been devoted, past and present. Some of the most illustrious thinkers have written on this topic, like Ibn Taymiyah, Ibn Sayyid al-Batalyawsī, and Ahmad Shah al-Dahlawī. In summary, the most important causes of scholarly disagreement include the follows:

1. Being Unaware of Critical Evidence

The Prophet's Sunnah clarifies and adds detail to the general teachings found in the Qur'an. However, the Sunnah is vast, and it is easy for a scholar to be unaware of certain parts of it. This was even the case for the Prophets' Companions. For instance, we have the following account from Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī:

I was sitting in the company of the local people of Madinah when Abū Mūsa came to me worried and flustered. We asked him what was the matter.

He answered: “‘Umar (the Caliph) summoned me to his house. I came to his door and called out the salutation of peace three times. When he did not reply, I turned around and left. Then ‘Umar confronted me and asked me: ‘What prevented you from coming to me?’ I said: ‘I did come, and I greeted you at your door three times, but you did not answer me, so I left. This is because the Prophet said: *If you seek permission to enter three times and no one answers, then leave.*’

“At this point, ‘Umar said to me: ‘You better bring proof of what you say, or I will have you punished.’”

After hearing Abū Mūsa's account, Ubayy b. Ka'b spoke up: “Indeed, the youngest in our company will go and testify that he has spoken the truth.”

Then I said: "I am the youngest of us all."

Ubayy said: "Then you go." So I went off with Abū Mūsā and testified to the veracity of what he had told 'Umar. [Sahīb al-Bukhārī (2062, 6245) and Sahīb Muslim (2153, 2154)]

There are cases where a great number of Companions were unaware of a particular text from the Sunnah. We should not be surprised that this would be so for those who came after them.

When a delegation including the Caliph 'Umar approached Damascus, they were informed that the city had been stricken by plague. They argued about whether they should enter the city. 'Umar first consulted some of the senior Companions who had emigrated from Mecca, but found that they could not come to an agreement. Some said: "We have come this far, so we should go on." Others opined: "We have a lot of people and some of the Prophet's Companions in our company. We should not expose them to the plague." He then consulted the eminent Companions from Madinah, but they were just as divided in their opinion. Finally, he consulted those who accepted Islam after the conquest of Mecca, and they indicated that he should not enter the city. He accepted their opinion.

Abū 'Ubayd then asked 'Umar: "Commander of the Faithful, are we fleeing from Allah's decree?"

'Umar replied: "Yes, we are fleeing from Allah's decree towards Allah's decree."

Then 'Abd al-Rahmān b. 'Awf, who had been away on an errand, stepped forward and said: "I know something relevant to this matter. I heard Allah's Messenger say: "If you hear that plague has struck a land, do not enter it. If you are in a place beset by plague, then do not leave and try to escape it." [Sahīb al-Bukhārī (5729) and Sahīb Muslim (2219)]

The hadith that 'Abd al-Rahmān b. 'Awf related from the Prophet confirmed 'Umar's opinion on the matter. This illustrates how the lack of knowledge regarding evidence from the Sunnah can lead to scholarly disagreement. It also illustrates two principles of Islamic law. First, it shows us that matters of public welfare must be given thorough consideration.

The second thing it demonstrates is that disagreement is acceptable when a new situation arises, especially among those who are competent and have sufficient knowledge. We see that the senior Companions from the emigrants of Mecca and those who sheltered them in Madinah were unable to reach an agreement on the matter, but none of them censured anyone else because they disagreed or blamed those who were ultimately shown to be wrong. This is because qualified people are allowed to exercise their judgement in matters of Islamic law where no direct textual evidence is known.

We can discern in their disagreement a difference in outlook. Those among the Companions who favoured the exercise of faith through patience and fortitude wanted to go forward. Those who had a better appreciation of the Law and considerations of public welfare opted for turning back. This latter group were the more knowledgeable, and they were proven to be right.

The great jurist al-Shāfi'i once told his colleague Ahmad b. Hanbal, an expert on the Sunnah: "If you know a hadith on a matter that is authentically related from the Prophet, inform me of it so I can retract my opinion and adopt it." These were two of the four imams who founded the schools of Islamic Law, the other two being Abū Hanīfah and Mālik. They were all known for expressing an opinion and then making that opinion conditional on whether a certain hadith supporting or contradicting it was authentic.

2. Forgetting Critical Evidence

A scholar may have heard a relevant hadith but then forgotten it. 'Ā'ishah relates that, upon hearing a man reciting a chapter of the Qur'an late at night, Allah's Messenger said: "May Allah have mercy on him! He has reminded me of a verse that I had forgotten from that chapter of the Qur'an." [Sahīb al-Bukhārī (5038) and Sahīb Muslim (788)]

This is an example of a temporary lapse of memory, something that would be recalled on its own sooner or later. However, sometimes even the greatest scholars forget a piece of knowledge altogether. Books have been written on this matter, especially in the literature of hadith narration, one of the most famous being the

work of al-Suyūtī entitled *A Compendium of Those Who Narrated Hadith Then Forgot Them*.

The hadith scholar Ibn al-Salāh gives the example of a chain of transmission exhibiting this phenomenon: “So-and-so related to me that I had related to him...” Here we have the case of a narrator who had forgotten a hadith he used to narrate. Later, it got back to him from one of his old students. Henceforth, he had to relate the hadith saying that he heard it from someone who had heard it from him!

Another example of forgetfulness is what happened to the eminent Companion Hudhayfah. He was leading the people in prayer standing on slightly elevated ground. Abū Mas`ūd tugged on his shirt, pulling him back from the elevation. Hudhayfah complied easily and settled into a position where he was level with the worshippers who were following his prayer. After the prayer was over, Abū Mas`ūd asked him: “Don’t you know that they used to prohibit that?” He was referring to the prohibition of the imam leading prayer from a higher position than the rows of worshippers when there is no need to do so.

Hudhayfah replied: “Indeed I do. I remembered it the moment you tugged on my shirt.”

3. Considering the Evidence to Be Invalid

A scholar might be well aware of a particular hadith but determine that its chain of transmission is not sound. It is quite common for authorities on hadith to disagree whether a particular narration is authentic or not. They disagree just as often as jurists differ on legal rulings. Sometimes hadith scholars’ disagreements go back to different methodological principles in determining authenticity. Some are known to be more strict than others in their assessments.

A well-known example of this kind of disagreement relates to the question of whether a person who is not in a state of ritual purification can touch the Qur’ān. The leading jurists of the four canonical schools of law agree that it is impermissible to do so. They base their ruling on the hadith where the Prophet said: “No

one should touch the Qur’ān who is not in a state of purity.” [al-Muwatta’ (1/199) and *Sahīh Ibn Hibbān* (6559)]

This hadith has been deemed sound enough to use as evidence due to the large number of corroborating lines of transmission that it has, though no single chain of transmission is free from defects.³ Furthermore, the jurists use this hadith to reinforce their interpretation of a passage of the Qur’ān that reads: “It is a noble Qur’ān, in a protected Book; none touches it save those who are pure.” [Sūrah al-Wāqī’ah: 77-79]

Other jurists, among them al-Tabārī and Ibn Hazm, held the view that it is permitted for a person in a state of minor ritual impurity to touch the Qur’ān, because they did not regard the hadith as being authentic. As a consequence, they interpreted the verse in the context of referring to the protected tablet of the Qur’ān in heaven, and to be talking about the angels.

4. Considering the Available Evidence to Be Off the Point

Textual evidence, with regards to its clarity, can be divided into two categories. First, there are texts that are perfectly clear in indicating a specific point, so that no other interpretation or understanding is possible. For instance, Allah says regarding inheritance: “They receive half of what the wife leaves behind if the wife has no children.” [Sūrah al-Nisā’: 12]

This verse can only be understood in one way. This is because the word ‘half’ indicates a quantity about which there is no ambiguity. Therefore, scholars agree that if a married woman dies and she leaves behind no children to inherit from her, then her husband inherits half of her estate.

Then there are texts whose language allows for more than one valid interpretation. A clear example from the Qur’ān is the verse: “Divorced women have a waiting period of three menstrual cycles.” [Sūrah al-Baqarah: 228]

³ It has been narrated independently from Amr b. Hazm, hākim b. Hizām, ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Umar, and others.

This verse is clear that a divorced woman can only get married to someone else after three menstrual cycles (assuming she is not pregnant or past the age of menstruation, for which other rules apply). However, the verse is unclear whether these cycles should be counted from the time of bleeding or the time in between. This difference in understanding can affect exactly how much time a woman will have to wait. There is no decisive way to resolve the issue from a linguistic angle, since the wording applies to both possibilities equally, and there is no other textual evidence that clarifies the verse's intent. For this reason, the Companions disagreed on the ruling to be derived from this verse, and scholars have been equally divided on the issue ever since.

The same thing happens with the hadith. Indeed, most textual evidence is open to more than one interpretation. Therefore, a scholar can be aware of a hadith and consider it valid, but understand it in a way that makes it inapplicable to the matter under investigation.

5. Conflicting Evidence

In some cases, the text in question is both authentic and clear in what it means; however, it is in apparent contradiction with another text. This situation engenders a lot of scholarly disagreement, since a scholar might opt to disregard the clear legal implications of one text in favour of another which he or she determines to be stronger. Disagreements in law arise when scholars differ as to which text provides the more compelling evidence for the issue at hand.

A good example for this kind of disagreement is the issue of whether touching one's private parts nullifies the state of ritual purity. There are two contradictory hadith on this issue. The first is related from Bushrah bint Safwān that the Prophet said: "Whoever touches their private area must perform ritual ablutions." [Sunan al-Tirmidhī (82), Sunan Abī Dāwūd (181) Sunan al-Nasā'i (1/216) and Sunan Ibn Mājah (479)] The meaning of this hadith is that touching the private parts nullifies the state of ritual purity, requiring a person to perform ablutions before offering prayer.

The second hadith is related from Talq b. 'Alī that a man asked the Prophet about whether people need to perform ablutions before prayer after touching their private parts. The Prophet replied: "It's just a part of your body." [Sunan al-Tirmidhī (85), Sunan Abī Dāwūd (182) Sunan al-Nasā'i (1/101) and Sunan Ibn Mājah (483)] Here, the Prophet is comparing the touching of the private area to touching any other body part when it comes to its effect on ritual purity.

These two hadīth appear to give conflicting rulings on the matter, and scholars have had to determine what they mean. Some scholars have favoured the first hadith and ruled that touching the private area nullifies a person's state of ritual purity, and others have given preference to the second hadith and decreed that touching the private area has no effect.

Those who favoured the first hadith argued that since it goes against the default assumption that a person remains in a state of ritual purity, it is providing a new ruling and therefore must have been the last thing the Prophet said on the matter. The other statement must have been something the Prophet said earlier, and was later abrogated.

Other scholars have countered that the best way to approach these two texts is to try and reconcile them. They argue that when the Prophet said it was just a body part, he was making it clear that touching the private area does not negate one's state of ritual purity. When he said that one should make ablutions after touching it, he was describing what was preferable to do, but not imposing an obligation.

Still a third group of scholars found another way to reconcile the two hadith by saying that touching the private area only nullifies one's state of ritual purity if it induces erotic feelings; otherwise it is just like touching any other part of the body.

6. Varying Abilities

Scholars differ in their strengths. This is true whether we are talking about strength of character or intellectual strength. There are scholars who possess a sharp intellect and a deep level of understanding who also have the personal fortitude to endure

criticism and speak their mind in the face of opposition. We see this combination of qualities in 'Umar b. al-Khattāb. Many narrations have come down to us where he disagreed with other Companions on matters where he had a different understanding. He was blessed with a keen mind and the strength of character to match it.

There are also those scholars who have sound opinions and good ideas, but they keep what they think to themselves, fearing reprisal. They might make a bequest to have their writings published after they die, because they do not think they have the strength of character to deal with the controversy and criticism they know that their views are going to create.

7. Different Levels of Knowledge

This disparity in knowledge not only occurs between people, but also within a single individual over the course of time. This is why scholars often change their minds. As they acquire more knowledge, it forces them to revise their opinions. We find this to be the case for nearly every major scholar.

It is also the case with the Prophet. Ibn Hajar and al-Nawawi, in their famous hadith commentaries, discuss hadith narrations that appear contradictory in meaning. Quite often, they account for the difference by saying that one of the traditions is later than the other, and the reason for the difference between them is that the Prophet acquired knowledge he did not possess before.

Allah tells us in the Qur'an to offer the following supplication: "Say: My Lord! Increase me in knowledge!" [Sūrah TāHā: 114]

8. Differing Circumstances

There are many ways that cultural norms, general conditions, and the surrounding environment can effect one's opinions. Indeed, different circumstances require different solutions. A society where religious commitment is strong is not the same as one where people are spiritually weak. People living in poverty are not going to need the same things as those who enjoy prosperity. What is required in times of war and instability can differ from what is needed when people are living in a state of peace and security. Likewise,

exceptional circumstances need to be addressed by unique solutions which might not be appropriate under normal conditions.

It is crucial to understand the underlying reason behind the rulings propounded by Islamic Law, in order to know whether that reason is being realized when the law is applied in a particular situation. It is also important to determine whether the conditions for implementing that ruling have all been met and that no factor is present that would prohibit its implementation.

During the Prophet's time, a Bedouin came to the mosque in Madinah, entered it, went over to a corner, and urinated. The Companions were outraged by his behaviour and wanted to chastise him for it. They had good reason to be angry. The mosque was a sacred place and the man had gone inside and done something disgraceful. They wanted to correct him for his wrongdoing. However, the Prophet understood the level of that desert dweller's understanding, so he prevented the Companions from criticising him. He signalled to them to wait until the man had finished relieving himself, then instructed them to bring water and wash that area of the mosque. He then went to that man and explained to him gently how he is supposed to behave in a mosque.

This shows us how important it is to consider the background of the individual in the application of Islamic Law. This is one of the contingent factors, like the environment, that can lead to a disagreement regarding the appropriate ruling.

9. Human Nature

Religious scholars are just like everybody else. Personality plays a major role in determining a person's outlook and perspective. All people have idiosyncrasies, preferences, and biases. Each person has a unique set of fears and desires, likes and dislikes. Some people have an optimistic, easygoing approach to life, while others are pessimistic and view the world in a darker light. Some people are stern while others are lenient. Some are reclusive while others are sociable.

Each of the great imams had a unique personality. Mālik took pleasure in the simple but good things in life. Ahmad b. Hanbal, on the other hand, was very keen on self-sufficiency, even in what he

ate and wore. He did not like depending on others for anything. These factors are part of what made them the people they were. There is no blame on scholars for the personalities Allah has given them. Yet, these differences inevitably affect their thinking and contribute to disagreements in scholarly opinion. Islamic Law is broad enough to accommodate and engage with the full spectrum of human experience and sentiment. This is why no scholar and no school of thought will ever be able to claim to represent Islamic law in its entirety.

10. Self-Interest, Bigotry and Prejudice

These factors cause disagreements which are reprehensible and blameworthy. We must keep in mind that when the people in question are knowledgeable and God-fearing, their differences are rarely ever based on self-interest. Certainly, the pre-eminent scholars, like the four imams, were able to keep themselves above such things. However, it can happen on rare occasions that even someone with a reputation for religious knowledge and piety can fall victim to these faults. Bigotry has been a serious problem throughout Muslim history. It has caused great misery and loss. Cities and whole countries have fallen on account of it. It has spurred on innumerable conflicts.

People who have been blinded by bigotry or self-interest are usually unaware of it. They would have to engage in serious introspection and interrogate their innermost motives to realize their affliction. Convinced of their own arguments and the righteousness of their cause, they inevitably perceive everyone else to be self-motivated and biased.

These are the ten most common causes of disagreement among Muslim scholars. There are certainly other reasons, but rarely does a disagreement occur without one of the above-mentioned reasons having something to do with it.

Some Observations on Favouring One Opinion Over Another

I wish to offer some suggestions regarding the way opinions should be weighed and how people of knowledge should conduct themselves in matters wherein legal scholars differ.

1. A scholar should make every effort to verify the facts, investigate all arguments, and pursue all lines of evidence.

An Islamic scholar should keep in mind that other people are going to follow his or her opinion. A saying goes: "When a scholar slips up, the world stumbles." This is why it is imperative for scholars to choose their words carefully and be precise in what they say. They should speak only after making a thorough investigation of the evidence.

Students of religious knowledge can be taken by surprise with a question while giving a lecture or speaking on air. They sometimes find it too difficult to say: "I don't know." This is in spite of the fact that there are an endless number of questions and it is impossible for anyone to have the answers for them all at hand. Instead, they try to escape embarrassment. In the absence of any evidence, sometimes they take the strict approach, since they feel this puts them on the safe side. They might couch their answer in indecisive words. This is why you hear statements like: "It is better to avoid that." or "It is more appropriate to consider it unlawful."

This can lead them into other difficulties. One student was asked whether it was okay to leave off performance of the witr prayer. The student being asked was both hasty and emotional, so he said: 'Neglecting this prayer is misguidance. Leaving off its observance is the type of thing that cast doubts on one's character and makes one's testimony in court invalid. Someone who neglects the witr prayer today will be neglecting the five obligatory prayers tomorrow.'

Much of this, or course, went beyond the question he was initially asked. After saying all this in public, this student did some research and was relieved to find that the scholars of Kufa did indeed hold the view that the witr prayer is obligatory. Henceforth, this became the opinion he adopted and promoted.

Some people are not so "fortunate". In their haste to answer, they say something that is extreme or that goes against the binding consensus of the Muslims. If they had only hesitated, they would have been able to do what they initially set out to do, which is to call people to good deeds, instead of putting themselves on the spot.

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Not all people in this situation answer with strict opinions. Some of them go the other way and volunteer lenient answers. Their intention is to avoid subjecting the people to difficulty. However, sometimes they end up advising people to do things that are clearly sinful in Islam.

A scholar should always wait until thoroughly researching a question before speaking. This includes referring to the opinions of other scholars and critically engaging with their arguments. It is also important to address the public in a way that they will understand. Many of the people being spoken to have no background in Islamic Law, are unfamiliar with the legal terminology, and cannot appreciate the implications and subtle nuances in a scholar's answer which would be understood by other scholars. When a scholar answers a question hastily, without being clear and precise, it can result in a lot of unnecessary confusion.

For instance, most Islamic scholars permit Muslims living in non-Muslim countries to deposit their savings in interest-bearing bank accounts. They also permit the Muslims to withdraw the interest and give it away in charity, rather than leaving it in the bank for the bank to use in its own pursuits. However, many people who hear this ruling do not understand that it is specific for certain locations where circumstances necessitate that a person opens an interest-bearing account. They do not appreciate that the purpose of withdrawing the interest is simply to get rid of it, not to benefit from it. Instead, you hear people saying: "Sheikh So-and-So says banking interest is lawful."

This is why students and scholars of Islamic Law need to take extra pains to make themselves clear. They need to explain the circumstances under which the ruling applies and those under which it is inapplicable.

Another bad tendency with some students of Islamic knowledge is how easily they use the word "unbelief". They might feel this is a way to emphasise the seriousness of what they are saying, or a way to bully their listeners into compliance. If they are confronted about doing so, they explain that they are describing the violation itself as unbelief, but not calling the perpetrator an unbeliever. They forget that they are talking to the general public, and therefore to people who are unlikely to make the distinction.

2. *A scholar should never give preference to one opinion over another without having a valid reason for doing so.*

The fact that there is scholarly disagreement on a matter does not give someone license to pick and choose on a whim. There is some level of disagreement in almost all questions of Islamic Law, and the mere existence of a second opinion is not evidence that all opinions are equally acceptable. The only case where a scholar is free to choose between two opinions is when the evidence and arguments for both are equally compelling.

Otherwise, there must be a justification for favouring one opinion over the other. This justification might be a verse of Qur'an, a hadith, or a principle of jurisprudence. In some cases, it might be that it best realises the general welfare of the people. Sometimes, in the absence of other reasons, the fact that it is the view of the majority of scholars holds a lot of weight. This is especially the case where some scholars argue that a certain view is a matter of scholarly consensus. Even if this proves not to be the case, the overwhelmingly strong agreement about a particular ruling is a valid reason to consider it more favourably.

There are people who like to shop among scholarly opinions, choosing whatever suits their fancy. This is wrong, because Islamic teaching are at stake, teachings that are based ultimately on revelation from Allah, and they are not to be subjected to personal desires. This is why Allah says to His Messenger: "And now We have set you (O Muhammad) on a clear road of (Our) commandment; so follow it, and do not follow the whims of those who have no knowledge." [Sūrah al-Jāthiyah: 18]

3. *Unusual opinions that conflict with clear textual evidence or scholarly consensus should be avoided.*

Sometimes an opinion conflicts with the consensus of the Muslims. When we talk about consensus, we mean that which has been established with certainty within the Muslim community without any dissention, or that which has been the practice of the Muslims in every age without exception. Near to this in strength is where a large number of scholars have asserted that consensus

exists on a matter and no objection can be found to this in any of the scholarly sources.

The situation is not the same for less rigorous claims of consensus. There are scholars who are known for the habit of declaring something to be a matter of consensus simply because they have never heard any disagreement about it. This is not sufficient. You may be unaware of a dissenting opinion, but that does not mean it is nonexistent. This is why Ahmad b. Hanbal said: "Whoever claims there is consensus on something has spoken untruly. It may be that people have disagreed, but he is unaware of it."

Then there are people who consider it consensus whenever the four schools of law agree on something, these being the schools of Abū Hanīfah, Mālik, al-Shāfi'i, and Ahmad b. Hanbal. This is untrue. There are many cases where these four imams agreed on something, but disagreed with many of their contemporaries, or the Successors, or a number of the Prophet's Companions. We can see that later scholars of these schools sometimes resort to those other opinions. For instance, there are a number of cases where the Hanbalī jurist Ibn Qudāmah gives preference to the views of these other scholars in his legal encyclopaedia *al-Mughnī*.

Once a scholar declares a certain opinion to be a matter of consensus, other scholars follow suit in their works, until it appears that dozens of authorities are claiming it so. However, a little comparative research will reveal that they are all relying on one source for their claim.

A good example of this is the question of whether wine and similar alcoholic beverages are impure. There is certainly consensus that it is unlawful to consume such beverages, because they intoxicate, but whether they are also impure is a matter of very strong scholarly debate. A number of scholars have held the view that wine is not an impure substance, due to a lack of any direct textual evidence to establish its impurity. Moreover, there is compelling evidence that it is a pure substance. First, there is the fact that it starts out pure before fermentation, so there is no reason to assume that its becoming an intoxicating beverage changes its state of purity. Then there is the fact that the Prophet ordered the people of Madinah to dispose of their wine by pouring it out in the

streets. This was on the day that the verse was revealed declaring wine to be unlawful. Had it also been impure, he would not have commanded them to dispose of it in that manner. Moreover, the Prophet never instructed anyone to wash their clothes or their bodies if wine splashed on them, even after it had become unlawful to drink.

The jurists al-Rabī' and Dāwūd al-Zāhirī said: "Wine is a pure substance, even though it is unlawful to consume. It is the same as poison, which is surely prohibited, though it is not an impurity."

The purity of wine has also been related from the jurists al-Layth, al-Muzanī, and some of the later jurists from Baghdad and Kairouan. In recent ages, a number of scholars have favoured this opinion, including al-Shawkānī, al-San`ānī, Muhammad Rashīd Ridā, al-Albānī, and Ibn al-`Uthaymīn.

A similar case is the question of whether blood that flows from a wound is pure. Like the previous question, there have been a great number of scholars who assert that its impurity is a matter of consensus. Nevertheless, there have been a number of illustrious jurists, past and present, who have held the view that it is pure. Surely, the claim of consensus in this case is suspect.

Be that as it may, there are cases where consensus is certain, with regard to both Islamic beliefs and questions of law. These have to be respected.

4. *A researcher can give preference to a certain point of view on the basis of sound evidence. Nevertheless, it is wrong to think that this is the one correct ruling in accordance with the Qur'an and Sunnah or that it is the only true representation of how the Pious Predecessors thought on the issue.*

Someone who chooses an opinion at variance with the view of al-Shāfi'i, for instance, should pay heed to the fact that al-Shāfi'i favoured his view on the basis of the Qur'an and Sunnah as well. The same goes for Mālik, Abū Hanīfah, and Ahmad. Therefore, it shows a lack of legal understanding to say that the specific opinion you personally favour is the inevitable consequence of following the Qur'an and Sunnah. It is actually a bit conceited. You are fully within your rights to hold the opinion you do, based on the evidence you understand from the sacred texts. However, it is still

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your personal understanding, and you may have overlooked something in your reasoning, or failed to see some other angle to the question due to your own inherent biases.

There is a big difference between engaging in research to determine for yourself what the best opinion is on a question, and doing so to accuse others of wrongdoing for coming to different conclusions. It is wrong to insinuate that they are not following the Qur'an and Sunnah, or that they are not giving due respect to the sacred texts. Beware of ostentation and pride.

The Prophet said: "No one will enter Paradise who has an atom's weight of pride in their heart."

A man said to him: "Some of us like to have beautiful clothes and nice shoes."

The Prophet replied: "Allah is beautiful, and He loves beauty. Pride is to disregard the truth and hold people in contempt." [Sahih Muslim (91)]

Specialists & Laypeople

People need the religious scholars to guide them in matters relating to Islamic teachings. Likewise, the scholars need other people for everything else. The gulf that exists in society between religious scholars and the general public varies depending on the social norms which govern that relationship and the way in which religious scholars are perceived in the social milieu. Nevertheless, there are certain general points to consider.

1. It is Wrong to Delve into Matters of Disagreement without the Requisite Knowledge

Allah says: "Do not pursue what you have no knowledge of, for surely the hearing, the sight, and the heart all will be questioned.." [Sūrah al-Isrā': 36]

A person who does not know about something should not act as if he or she does, even if that person is highly educated and specialized in some other branch of knowledge. Being qualified in one field does not make a person capable of pursuing research in

every other field. It is related that Prophet Muhammad said: "From the excellence of a person's religion is to leave off what does not concern him." [Sunan al-Tirmidhī (2317)]

In matters of Islamic Law, especially those that pertain to new and unprecedented issues, long study and practical experience are needed. Scholars need to understand how various opinions have been arrived at and what distinguishes one opinion from another, and they must be conversant with the legal rationales and conditions underlying various rulings. This depth of knowledge does not come quickly or easily.

Of course, all Muslims need to possess religious knowledge. They need to know what is required of them to live according to the dictates of their faith in their daily lives. As for the broader scope of Islamic legal questions, especially those wherein public policy are at stake, this is the domain of specialists. Like any other specialisation, years of study and devotion are required to gain mastery in the field. Society's need for specialised religious scholars and jurists is no different than its need for doctors, administrators, media specialists, and members of all other vocations.

There are religious questions which are clear to everyone. These are matters of Islamic Law where the various scholarly opinions are well-known and easy to discern, and where the evidence for everyone's argument is obvious. The simplicity and familiarity of these matters should not cause us to underestimate the difficulties scholars wrestle with while engaging with the Islamic legal dimensions of today's pressing issues, issues which can seriously affect the lives of many people and even the policies of countries. These questions need to be approached carefully and be given the long, nuanced consideration they deserve at the hands of people who possess the requisite knowledge.

It is a trust and a tremendous public responsibility to speak about such matters. Those who do so must not only be religious, but knowledgeable as well. Their religiousness ensures they will avoid injustice and respect those who differ. Their knowledge ensures they will not say something in ignorance. Allah warns us about our tendency to take on trusts we are not ready to assume: "We did indeed offer the Trust to the Heavens and the Earth and the mountains; but they refused to undertake it, being afraid

thereof: but humanity undertook it. They were indeed unjust and foolish.” [Sūrah al-Abzāb: 72]

It is not enough to be honest and sincere, though these qualities are indispensable. The people who engage in such matters must possess the knowledge needed to ensure they do not speak something contrary to the teachings of Islam. This is why Allah rebukes those who speak with insufficient knowledge: “When there comes to them some matter touching public safety or fear, they spread it abroad; and if they had referred it to the Messenger and to those in authority among them, those among them who are able to think out the matter would have known it.” [Sūrah al-Nisā’: 83]

In his seminal work on jurisprudence, *al-Risālah*, al-Shāfi‘ī comments on this verse, saying:

This is a degree of knowledge which the general public does not possess. It is not even required of all specialists. As for those specialists who can attain it, it is their collective duty that at least some of them acquire it. As long as a sufficient number of people do so, then others are not blameworthy for not doing so, but those who acquire it have a distinction over those who neglect it.

‘Umar, the illustrious Caliph, once lamented: “I wish that there weren’t so many people involved in this field.” Ibn ‘Abbās asked him why he felt that way. He replied: “I fear that they will debate it endlessly.” ‘Umar was right. Contentious disputes and bitter arguments usually result from everyone thinking they possess the best grasp on the truth on account of whatever little knowledge they have. They fancy themselves experts in a field when they are really way in over their heads.

2. It is Best to Err on the Side of Caution

People find themselves confronted with a lot of divergent opinions. On a single question, we will find someone saying it is an Islamic duty. Someone else will say it is preferable but not obligatory. A third will say it is merely an optional matter. There are

even cases where one scholar says something is a religious obligation while another says it is a prohibited sin. In such an extreme case, there is no way to play it safe. Otherwise, it is possible for a person to adopt a cautious attitude and adopt in his or her personal religious life a practice that avoids the scholarly disagreement.

For instance, where there are people saying something is a religious obligation and others saying it is merely preferable or optional, the safe thing to do is adopt it in one’s personal practice without declaring to others anything about whether or not it is an obligation. Likewise, if some scholars say committing a certain thing is a sin while others say that it is merely disliked, the safest thing to do is simply to abstain from it. This is according to the Prophet’s guidance. He said: “Whoever is cautious to avoid dubious matters has safeguarded his faith and honour.” [Sahīb al-Bukhārī (52) and Sahīb Muslim (1599)]

A lot of people do not understand caution except in avoiding things. They do not realize that it also sometimes entails action. It is just as bad to neglect one’s duties as it is to commit a misdeed.

A number of things must be taken into consideration when it comes to erring on the side of caution. First, it is a personal matter that pertains only to someone’s own life decisions. It is not something to be imposed on anyone else, even one’s spouse or nearest relatives and friends. To call others to it is to put unnecessary burdens on them and to impose on people more than what Islam requires of them.

Secondly, there are some matters wherein it is not possible to play it safe, like when scholarly opinion is divided whether something is obligatory or forbidden in Islam. To follow one opinion means to commit a sin according to the other. An example of this is whether one must recite *Sūrah al-Fātiḥah* in congregation prayer while following an imam who is reciting out loud. Some scholars argue that it is obligatory to do so since the Prophet said: “There is no prayer for one who does not recite the *Fātiḥah*.” [Sahīb al-Bukhārī (756) and Sahīb Muslim (394)]

Other scholars assert that it is sinful to recite the *Fātiḥah* while the imam is reading the Qur’ān out loud, because Allah says in the

Qur'an: "When the Qur'an is being recited, listen to it and be silent, so perhaps you can receive mercy." [Sūrah al-A'rāf: 204]

In this case, a person has to come to a decision. This decision may be arrived at through research or through consulting with people of knowledge about the evidence and arguments supporting the different points of view. It may also take the form of simply finding someone whose piety pleases you and whose expert opinion you trust and following their opinion on the matter. This is the only option available to a person who has no background in Islamic Law.

Finally, the approach of erring on the side of caution is not a legal argument in its own right. This is because there is scholarly disagreement in many matters of Islamic Law. It is not a sound policy for someone to abandon everything which a few scholars have declared undesirable. There are many cases where the evidence supports permissibility, and there is no reason why a person cannot treat the matter as something permissible.

Whenever someone truly determines that one opinion is the strongest, it is within their rights to adopt that opinion. No one is burdened to eschew everything that some scholars have declared disliked or unlawful in Islam, especially when such claims are weak compared to the opposing view. It would not be possible to live that way. However, when both views are backed by compelling arguments and it is difficult to determine which one is right, this is when it becomes a viable option to adopt the more cautious approach.

3. Assume the Best about Those Who Disagree with You

It is wrong to assume that a scholar deliberately ignored evidence or disregarded Islamic teachings. It might be that the scholar was unaware of the evidence in question or other evidence seemed more compelling, or the circumstances warranted a particular application of the evidence at hand. Moreover, it may be that the scholar possessed knowledge that those who disagree are unaware of.

When I disagree with a scholar, I find it best to say: "That scholar may be the one who is right. He or she may have seen

evidence I do not know about, but I am responsible to my Lord to act upon what my knowledge dictates." This is because Allah says: "Allah burdens no soul beyond the extent of its abilities." [Sūrah al-Baqarah: 286]

Every scholar has opinions that are unique, that are not shared by others. This was the case for the Companions, the leading jurists who founded the legal schools, their students, and other jurists up to the present day. Being alone in an opinion does not mean that opinion is wrong. Sometimes the passage of time and changing circumstances reveal that lone scholar's opinion to be the right one. What was once a rare point of view becomes the one advocated by the majority. There have been many cases like this, which those who research the development of legal opinion find quite often.

This is why it is important not to blame scholars for the opinions they hold. We must assume the best about them, especially if they are of proven knowledge and sound reputation. We should behave toward their opinions at least as well as we would like people to behave towards ours.

4. Following an Opinion Blindly

A person hears someone say: "This is lawful in Islam" or "This is forbidden" or "This is disliked" or "You must perform this act of worship in this manner." If the person follows that opinion without understanding the evidence and arguments for it, then he or she is following the speaker's opinion blindly.

Often this is what someone has to do. Most people do not have the background knowledge to look into the matter firsthand. They do not have the qualifications to deduce legal meanings from the sacred texts or deal with textual ambiguities. They need to refer to specialists.

The Hanbālī jurist Ibn Qudāmah says it is agreed that a layperson's school of thought is none other than that of the scholar he or she relies upon for legal knowledge. The layperson must take care in choosing the right scholar to follow. After that, the person's obedience to Allah is carried out in accordance with the legal verdicts received. Therefore, it is critically important to follow a

scholar possessing sound knowledge, a good reputation, and religious integrity.

All the same, we hear many later scholars like Ibn al-Qayyim, al-Shawkānī, and Muhammad Rāshīd Ridā criticising the practice of blind following. They are correct in their criticism of the practice, but it is only relevant for people who are able to do otherwise.

Indeed, some of the most vocal people to criticise blind following today are themselves guilty of it. You find them abandoning the opinion of their school of thought, but in fact they are following the opinion of their own teacher, often in quite a number of opinions. They are not always aware that they are blindly following their mentor. They might even call others to abandon blind following and to adopt the teachings of their sheikh at one and the same time, and with equal passion. They mistake their trust in their sheikh and their confidence in the sheikhs' methodology with actually knowing and understanding the evidence itself.

Moreover, there are many ways that blind reliance on others plays out. It is not always a case of following a particular religious scholar's opinion without understanding the evidence and arguments for it. This just one type of blind reliance. There are virtually limitless other ways it can take place. People blindly follow the norms of the society in which they live. They stay within the confines of what is familiar to them. They might follow a particular individual, or a school of thought in general. It is even possible to blindly follow yourself.

The Caliph 'Umar once gave a ruling in a matter of estate law that contradicted an earlier pronouncement he had made. People asked him: "O Commander of the Faithful, you used to say something else about this."

He replied: "That is what I previously determined to be the case. This is my determination now." [Musannaf 'Abd al-Razzāq (19005) and Musannaf Ibn Abī Shaybah (31097)] 'Umar did not blindly persist in his first opinion. He continued to look into the matter and changed his point of view when new knowledge came to him.

Relying blindly on others is a natural tendency. It can be subtle and go unnoticed by those who fall into it. Some people who

manage to avoid blindly relying on a particular jurist or school of thought in matters of Islamic Law fall victim to it in other ways. For instance, many students of Islamic knowledge who criticise the practice of adherence to a particular school of law or the blind following of a sheikh do so by quoting the statements of scholars who have criticised those practices in the past. They did not arrive on their own at their opposition to blind reliance. They did not base their conclusions on the strength of arguments, nor did they develop a deep understanding of the ramifications of the stance they have taken.

The Muslim world does not enjoy a level of religious education where everyone can be self-reliant in matters of Islamic Law. I do not believe this will ever happen, especially with the increasing diversity of circumstances that Muslims experience today and the frequency of new developments, all of which introduces problems whose solutions are anything but clear.

At the same time, it is good for Muslims to develop a positive consciousness towards critical thinking, and an awareness of the value of knowledge and the benefits of objective research. This does not mean that they should act recklessly and speak about matters of importance without knowledge. Yet, they need to be freed from the awe of religious sheikhs and the weight of historical tradition, while maintaining a healthy respect for Islam's legacy. We have in this matter what 'Umar said in one of his sermons:

The most critical question I leave unsettled for those who come after me is that of who inherits in the absence of near relatives. I never consulted with Allah's Messenger about anything more frequently than I consulted him about this. I did so often enough that he jabbed me in the chest with his finger and said: "The verse that was revealed in the summer, the last verse in *Surah al-Nisā'*,⁴ isn't it enough for you?"

⁴ The verse reads: "They ask you (O Muhammad) for a legal decision. Say: Allah directs (thus) about those who leave no descendants or ascendants as heirs. If it is a man that dies, leaving a sister but no child, she shall have half the inheritance. If (such a deceased was) a woman, who left no child, her brother takes her inheritance. If there are two sisters, they shall have two-thirds of the inheritance

How to Disagree

Indeed, as long as I live and have to give rulings on this matter, I will do so with a ruling that those who read the Qur'an and those who do not read the Qur'an could equally arrive at.

In this way, 'Umar illustrated the potential for Islamic legal questions to be grasped by the people at large. He presented this accessibility as a working principle, and it is indeed possible to put it into practice if Islamic scholars and preachers make an effort for it. It does not mean that people will cease in their reliance on scholars in matters of Islamic Law, but it does mean that they will be able to do so with an appreciation of the underlying evidence. This is something attainable in our day and age where the means of communication are open, literacy is widespread, and the treasure houses of knowledge have been made available to everyone. It has become possible for people to educate themselves more than ever before and to be able to engage directly with the Qur'an and Sunnah for themselves, not to mention their being able to develop the broader cultural awareness and nuanced thinking needed for deeper understanding.

(between them). If there are brothers and sisters, (they share), with the male having twice the share of the female. Thus Allah makes clear to you (His law), lest you err. And Allah has knowledge of all things." [Sūrah al-Nisā': 176]

How to Disagree

Everyone seems to be able to speak levelly about the etiquettes of disagreement in Islam. We can present the most beautiful theories couched in the most eloquent verbiage. However, it seems that few of us are able to put these ideas into practice. Many of us expect others to exhibit proper etiquettes when they disagree with us, but we fail to hold ourselves to the same standards.

We need to study the etiquettes of disagreement in earnest. This art needs to be taught in our schools and colleges and in our mosques. Our youth should be given practical training in debate so that these etiquettes can become their habit and even an aspect of their piety.

Yes, exhibiting such etiquettes is an act of devotion, since by doing so we obey Allah and put the Sunnah of our Prophet into practice. By practicing these etiquettes, we can make them our habit. Once they are properly inculcated, it will not be difficult to observe them at all times.

This is something we all need to do. The ruler needs these etiquettes so he can uphold the rights of the populace, even those among them who disagree with him. The Prophet upheld the rights of all people of Madinah who were under his authority, even those among Madinah's Jews who openly opposed him; indeed, even among the hypocrites. He was unquestionably patient and forbearing with his followers.

Scholars need to observe the etiquettes of disagreement so they can uphold the rights of their students and treat all their questions with respect. Their hearts need to be open to their students so they can prepare them to assume their future responsibilities. Teachers should never intimidate their students into submitting to their views, but should endeavour to make them strong, independent, and dignified.

Parents need to observe these etiquettes in their dealings with their children. They need to maintain a relationship of love and affection even when their children disagree with them. They must realize that the children of today will be the adults of tomorrow.

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Children cannot be a mere reflection of their parents. Each child is a unique individual with his or her own thoughts and ideas.

When we discuss the etiquettes of disagreement, we must also talk about the means of managing the disagreements that inevitably develop between us. We live in an era of openness. The barriers that once held us back are gone. Likewise, we live in the age of satellite communications and the Internet. Censorship and coercion are no longer effective, and the only solution left is to get down among the people and address the issues with the facts.

Public discourse today is full of contradictions. Opinions are spreading and being circulated to an unprecedented degree. In such an atmosphere, it is not appropriate to simply dismiss the ideas of others as foolish, no matter how shallow their arguments seem to be. We must lend them a respectful ear and respond to their ideas with ours. We must bring the appropriate medicine to treat the diseases we encounter if we wish to cure the maladies that afflict us.

The Internet, with its forums and social networks, has become an arena for open dialogue. In the Arabic language alone, there are now countless forums for the exchange of ideas. Unfortunately, the Internet is showing us how ill equipped we are to discuss things with each other. It exposes how little we realize about the broad spectrum of thought Islam tolerates in matters of religion and matters of public concern. It also shows us our blindness to the matters in which all Muslims agree and the extent to which we are allowed to disagree. These deficiencies on our part have had many negative consequences for Islamic discourse over the Internet. These shortcomings include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. You are Either with Me or Against Me

If I adopt this attitude, it means that if I detect the smallest point of disagreement between us – that you are not with me 100% – then I want to have nothing to do with you. In this way, friends become enemies overnight.

It has been related from Jesus that he said: “If you are not against me, then you are with me.” This is the way of Islam and the way all people should treat each other. The wise approach is to win people over to your line of thinking, to build bridges of

understanding between yourself and others. The worst thing to do is break off ties, terminate communication, and erect insurmountable barriers.

2. Blurring the Distinction between Topics and Personalities

We have a problem distinguishing between the topic we are discussing and the people with whom we are holding the discussion. Discussions about a particular point of contention often escalate into personal attacks on the people involved with accusations being thrown about regarding their integrity and their personal lives. As a result, many forums on the Internet have been reduced to venues for slander, character defamation, and scandal.

This leads to further polarization and factionalism between people. Evidence and rational arguments become irrelevant and emotional attachments have all the force. Everyone supports the views and comments of those they like and rejects the suggestions of those they dislike, regardless of who has the better idea. Moreover, the standard for liking someone and being confident with what they say has no basis in knowledge or past experience with their ideas, but rather on the endorsement of someone else from the in-group.

3. Mean-Tempered Dialogue

The tone of many of our discussions is wrong. Inappropriate language abounds. Curses and vulgarities have replaced civil discourse. Many great scholars, like al-Ghazālī, al-Shātibī, and Ibn Taymiyah, have pointed out that if arguments were won with the loudest voice and the harshest words, then fools would be the best debaters. Arguments are best won by presenting evidence with respect and sobriety. As we all know, an empty truck is always more noisy and racket on the road than one that is full of goods.

4. Exaggeration

There is too much hyperbole in our discussions. We make exaggerated claims to support our points of view. How many times during a debate do we hear someone say that a superb and

definitive article has been written on the matter of discussion which puts the case to rest? When and if we manage to get hold of the article, we find that instead of it being a work of substance and probity supported by evidence, it is a vacuous paper full of vindictive words directed at those who disagree with the author. It is unfortunate that so many people seem to consider this a sign of a paper's strength.

5. Empty Debate

This is where people continue to restate their own opinion without listening and responding to the arguments of those they are debating with. One young lady admitted to me that she had been like this. She described it as if she had been locked in a glass room where everyone could see her, but she could not hear them and they could not hear her. This is because she would only speak on matters about which she was already convinced, and she had no other concern but to convince everyone else she was right. She could not care less what they had to say.

A crucial aspect of any debate is what legal theorists refer to as determining the point of dispute. In many cases, disputants talk at cross purposes, because they have not defined and clarified the terms of the discussion. This leads to an endless and pointless exchange, because neither party understands the other's intent.

6. Self-centeredness

There is a lot of self-centeredness in our discussions. I mean by this what Allah warns about in the Qur'an when He tells us that Pharaoh said: "I but point out to you that which I see (myself); Nor do I guide you but to the Path of Right!" [Surah Ghâfir: 29]

People become so full of their own opinions that they can accommodate nothing else. It does not matter that what they hold true is merely a viewpoint and not an indisputable tenet of faith clearly stated in the Qur'an and Sunnah, nor a matter of consensus. The most that can be said for their opinion is that it might possibly be right. However, the individual becomes so enamoured of the idea that it becomes a personal obsession, as if it was the very crux

of his or her religious belief. Some people even beseech Allah to protect them from ever deviating from their point of view.

7. Unjustified Certitude

Too many people are convinced of their infallibility. They refuse to entertain the notion that their ideas just might be wrong and that someone else might just possibly be right.

In matters of Islamic Law, certainty is limited to those clearly identified aspects of revelation that are not open to any degree of interpretation, and to matters in which the unanimous consensus of the Muslims has been established. If Muslims could only understand this concept, it would solve a lot of problems. Unfortunately, in the heat of debate, people who otherwise understand this distinction begin speaking as if they are propounding on the essential tenets of faith, even if their opinion is based on nothing more than their personal preferences.

8. Superficiality and Oversimplification

Many matters are complicated and difficult to understand without considerable thought and effort. Many people are quick to assume that such ideas must be inherently false and contrary to the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah. If someone says something that is difficult to understand, it is judged as being deceptive and obtuse. What is really happening is that people are taking their own intellectual limitations as a standard of truth.

9. Defamation

Sometimes people wage a campaign to destroy the character of someone they disagree with. They begin spreading rumours and accusations. They start to circulate distortions of their opponent's ideas. It is almost as if their sole message to the world has become the defamation of their opponents. It is in this spirit that the following statements and others like them have been proclaimed on the air and posted on the Internet:

“He has neither dignity with Allah nor with any monotheist on Earth.”

“He has no share in Allah’s mercy.”

Look at the presumption of these statements. It is as if the people who made them think they can pass judgement on Allah’s behalf against His creatures. It gets even worse:

“He has died, and surely his new abode is Hell, and what a horrid place it is.”

Statements like this have been spoken against today’s leading scholars and selfless preachers, as well many illustrious scholars of the past. Those who utter such calumnies do not pause to think that Allah may determine matters quite differently. Then we have statements like these:

“He has deviant beliefs and a confused understanding.”

“He is a hypocrite.”

“He is an unbeliever.”

Those who make such statements must think very highly of themselves. Do they know the unseen? Are they receiving revelation? These statements are actually full of self-praise. In saying such things about others, these people are, by implication, declaring themselves to be saved and true believers, whether or not they are aware of it. They are vainglorious. The Prophet warned us that pride is: “to disregard the truth and hold people in contempt.”

The topics that inspire such bold statements are usually so theoretical that people cannot be expected to agree on them. What evidence exists on the issues is often contradictory and open to considerable interpretation. In any case, even when we are defending what we as Muslims hold to be the indisputable truth, it is always wise to start our discussions around matters wherein we

agree. Look at how Allah in the Qur'an commands us to address those who disbelieve in Islam:

“Say: ‘O People of the Scripture! Let us come to a mutual understanding between us to worship none but Allah, associating nothing with Him at all, and to refrain from taking some among ourselves as lords besides Allah.’ But if they turn away, then say: ‘Bear witness that we are Muslims’.” [Surah Al 'Imrān: 64]

“Say: ‘Who gives you sustenance from the heavens and the Earth?’ Say: ‘Allah. And indeed it is either we or you who are on manifest error. You will not be questioned about our crimes, and we will not be questioned about what you do.’” [Surah Saba': 24-25]

Look at the choice of words here. When Allah tells us to speak to them of our own actions, He instructs us to say: “You will not be questioned about *our crimes*.” But when He tells us to speak about our innocence of their actions, we are to use a softer tone and say: “...and we will not be questioned about *what you do*.”

Allah also says:

“Each of us acts according to his manner, but your Lord knows best who is most rightly guided to the way.” [Surah al-Isrā': 84]

“Surely your Lord knows best those who err from His way, and He knows best those who follow the right course.” [Surah al-Qalam: 7]

“Have you considered if he were on the right way, or enjoined righteousness? Have you considered if he gives the lie to the truth and turns (his) back? Does he not know that Allah sees (all)?” [Surah 'Alaq: 11-14]

Composure and gentleness of tone, when accompanied by sound evidence and intelligent arguments, provide the best way to refute falsehood and win hearts over to the truth.

In the small global village that the world has become, we find ourselves at a great disadvantage to others. Our incessant and futile bickering does nothing to alleviate our woes. Our enemies watch us as we tear into one another. What do we expect them to think of us? They can only say: “First, come to some agreement on what you believe and wish to present, then come and talk to us about it. Solve

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"Surely your Lord knows best those who err from His way, and He knows best those who follow the right course." [Surah al-Qalam: 7]

"Have you considered if he were on the right way, or enjoined righteousness? Have you considered if he gives the lie to the truth and turns (his) back? Does he not know that Allah sees (all)?" [Surah 'Alaq: 11-14]

Composure and gentleness of tone, when accompanied by sound evidence and intelligent arguments, provide the best way to refute falsehood and win hearts over to the truth.

In the small global village that the world has become, we find ourselves at a great disadvantage to others. Our incessant and futile bickering does nothing to alleviate our woes. Our enemies watch us as we tear into one another. What do we expect them to think of us? They can only say: "First, come to some agreement on what you believe and wish to present, then come and talk to us about it. Solve

"He has neither dignity with Allah nor with any monotheist on Earth."

"He has no share in Allah's mercy."

Look at the presumption of these statements. It is as if the people who made them think they can pass judgement on Allah's behalf against His creatures. It gets even worse:

"He has died, and surely his new abode is Hell, and what a horrid place it is."

Statements like this have been spoken against today's leading scholars and selfless preachers, as well many illustrious scholars of the past. Those who utter such calumnies do not pause to think that Allah may determine matters quite differently. Then we have statements like these:

"He has deviant beliefs and a confused understanding."

"He is a hypocrite."

"He is an unbeliever."

Those who make such statements must think very highly of themselves. Do they know the unseen? Are they receiving revelation? These statements are actually full of self-praise. In saying such things about others, these people are, by implication, declaring themselves to be saved and true believers, whether or not they are aware of it. They are vainglorious. The Prophet warned us that pride is: "to disregard the truth and hold people in contempt."

The topics that inspire such bold statements are usually so theoretical that people cannot be expected to agree on them. What evidence exists on the issues is often contradictory and open to considerable interpretation. In any case, even when we are defending what we as Muslims hold to be the indisputable truth, it is always wise to start our discussions around matters wherein we

agree. Look at how Allah in the Qur'an commands us to address those who disbelieve in Islam:

"Say: 'O People of the Scripture! Let us come to a mutual understanding between us to worship none but Allah, associating nothing with Him at all, and to refrain from taking some among ourselves as lords besides Allah.' But if they turn away, then say: 'Bear witness that we are Muslims'." [Surah Al 'Imrān: 64]

"Say: 'Who gives you sustenance from the heavens and the Earth?' Say: 'Allah. And indeed it is either we or you who are on manifest error. You will not be questioned about our crimes, and we will not be questioned about what you do'." [Surah Saba': 24-25]

Look at the choice of words here. When Allah tells us to speak to them of our own actions, He instructs us to say: "You will not be questioned about *our crimes*." But when He tells us to speak about our innocence of their actions, we are to use a softer tone and say: "...and we will not be questioned about *what you do*."

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your own problems before you come to us to solve the problems of the world."

Recently, I received some feedback on an article I wrote entitled "Between Myself and Ibn Jibrīn". I had thought that this article – which discusses matters that are still the source of considerable contention among Islamic workers – would only be of concern to a small number of Muslims and no one else. However, I received letters from perceptive non-Muslim men and women in America who not only understood what I wrote, but were perceptive enough to read between the lines. Their comments let me know how carefully they considered what I was saying and how well they understood it. Perhaps they understood it better than many of its intended audience.

The Right to Disagree

Differences are, by Allah's decree, an unavoidable part of life. People differ in many ways. They are different ethnically and culturally. They have different personalities, dispositions, and mindsets.

Allah says in the Qur'an: "And We created everything in pairs that perhaps you might take heed." [Sūrah al-Dhāriyāt: 49]

He also says: "O humankind! Verily We created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes to get to know one another. Verily the most honoured of you with Allah are those who are the most pious among you." [Sūrah al-Hujrāt: 13]

We should note that Allah says He made us different nations and tribes so we could get to know one another, not so we could fight and wage war. Moreover, this getting to know one another (*ta'āruf*) does not just entail acquaintance. It means to work together in positive ways for everyone's mutual benefit.

Human prosperity is not achieved by having one group of people fulfilling all of their desires and aspirations at everyone else's expense. How often have the excessive goals and desires of one nation been so diametrically opposed to those of another, that they could only be fully realized with the other's subjugation or extermination?

On a more intimate level, we see that even a single individual has disagreements and conflicts within his or her self. Indeed, each of us differs from day to day. Allah says: "You shall surely move from stage to stage." [Sūrah al-Inshiqāq: 19] and: "Indeed, your efforts are diverse." [Sūrah al-Layl: 4]

A person goes from childhood to adulthood to old age, experiencing sickness and health, prosperity and adversity.

A person's perspectives and opinions change. Indeed, a wise person is never content with his or her present level of knowledge, but is always seeking to improve it. We should not let our minds become prisoners to the familiar and commonplace.

The Prophet said: "If I swear an oath to do something and then see that something else brings with it greater good, then I offer an expiation for my oath and do that which is better." [Sahīb al-Bukhārī (31333) and Sahīb Muslim (1649)]

It is one of Allah's great blessings upon humanity that He has given us freedom of choice. In turn, Allah has made us accountable for the choices we make. If Allah had wished, He could have made humanity like the angels who have no will except to obey. Allah describes them as follows: "They do not disobey Allah's command and they do as they are commanded." [Sūrah al-Tahrim: 6]

However, Allah wished to create a being that He could test. As He says: "He may test some of you by means of others." [Sūrah Muhammād: 6]

This test not only comes by way of hardships, calamities, and strife, but by life in all its myriad demands. We are commanded to excel in all of our endeavours, from the most arduous to the most commonplace. The Prophet said: "Allah has ordained excellence in everything. So if one of you slaughters an animal, he should do it well. He should sharpen his blade and comfort the animal." [Sahīb Muslim (1955)]

The Prophet (peace be upon him) intentionally chose an example that would generally not cross people's minds when they think of excellence, and that is the example of slaughtering an animal for food.

We must aspire to excellence in our relationships with our spouses, our neighbours, and our colleagues at work. Allah has

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We must aspire to excellence in our relationships with our spouses, our neighbours, and our colleagues at work. Allah has

outlined for us the principles of proper manners and good moral conduct. We are expected to aspire to excellence in calling others to Islam, in engendering their affection, and in inspiring them to righteousness. Allah has made it permissible to give people Zakah funds simply to win over their hearts, be they non-Muslims or Muslims who are weak in faith.

Allah expects Muslims to do good merely for the sake of doing good, not just for the purpose of propagating the faith. We are rewarded and blessed for the good that we do even when we do not have the intention of doing so as an act of worship. Allah tells us: "Do good deeds. Perhaps you will find success." [Sūrah al-Hajj: 77]

Allah describes Muhammad by saying: "He is indeed upon a most excellent mode of conduct." [Sūrah al-Qalam: 4]

The Prophet exhibited the most excellent moral character with everyone. He treated everyone well, not just those people whom he expected to embrace Islam. He had been of the most impeccable character before he became the Prophet and his manner became even more remarkable afterward. He enjoined universal good manners, saying: "There is a reward for doing good to anyone possessing a living heart." [Sahīh al-Bukhārī (2363) and Sahīh Muslim (2244)]

He even encouraged being humane to animals, saying: "If you show mercy to a sheep, Allah will show mercy to you." [Musnād Ahmad (15165)] He also informed us how a prostitute gave water to a thirsty dog and attained Allah's forgiveness for doing so.

Islam did not come, as some people suppose, to incite conflicts between people. It came to perfect the way people relate to one another and to show them how to properly live on Earth. Allah says: "He brought you forth from the Earth and made you live upon it." [Sūrah Hūd: 11]

When Allah created Adam, He did so to have Him dwell upon the Earth and strive therein. When the angels came to know of this, they said: "Will you place therein one who will cause corruption and shed blood while we glorify Your praises and extol Your holiness?" [Sūrah al-Baqarah: 30]

The angels were well aware of how much Allah detests corruption and bloodshed. Allah did not create humanity or reveal

the scriptures so they could behave like that. Islamic Law came to safeguard and preserve the five basic human needs of religion, life, reason, dignity and property. This is why the Law prohibits murder, adultery, lying, theft, oppression, and other crimes.

It also came to protect people's rights, including their right to have different opinions. This is why Allah created the human being with free will. Therefore, Allah has made disagreement something acceptable. It can even be a source of blessings for those who disagree with each other if they are sincere, stay within the bounds of propriety, and have noble intentions.

Disagreement, in its essence, is a mercy since it is a source of flexibility. It only becomes harmful when it is driven by personal desires, base motives, and vested interests. Then it becomes a source of division, factionalism, and discord. A man once brought to Ahmad b. Hanbal a book wherein he had complied the opinions of Muslim scholars. He had entitled it *The Book of Disagreement*. Ahmad b. Hanbal told him: "Do not call it *The Book of Disagreement*, but call it *The Book of Leeway*." This shows just how astute an understanding Ahmad had of the nature of Islamic Law.

Some scholars have said: "The consensus of the Companions is a decisive proof for a matter, whereas their disagreement is a mercy and a source of flexibility."

'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz said: "By Allah! It would not have made me happy had the Companions of Muhammad never disagreed. Whenever they agreed unanimously on a matter, it means that anyone who ever disagrees with them is in manifest error. When they disagreed, this means that all of their opinions are options, and the matter at hand had some leeway in it."

What we need are sound guidelines for handling our disagreements, just like we need guidelines to govern our commerce, and rules of grammar to govern our discourse. We will always disagree with one another. The important thing is to conduct ourselves properly when we do so.

Etiquettes of Disagreement

We must conduct ourselves with proper decorum and observe the best of manners when we disagree with each other. We must

learn the etiquettes of disagreement and put them into practice. The most important of these etiquettes are as follows:

1. We must avoid censure and reproach.

We are not necessarily more sincere in faith, more intelligent, or more well-informed than those who disagree with us. Yahyā b. Sa`id once said: "As long as it is the case that, when people ask different scholars about something, some of them say it is forbidden and others say it is permitted, then the one who considers it permitted should not believe that the one who prohibits it is in perdition, and the one who considers it forbidden should not believe that the one who permits it is in perdition."

Ahmad b. Hanbal said: "There is no one better than Ishāq who has crossed the bridge over to us, though we disagree with him on some things. People will always disagree with one another."

People's opinions are not revelation from Allah. Schools of Islamic Law should not be confused with the religion itself.

Whenever the Prophet appointed a general to the army, he advised him to fear Allah and exhorted the troops under his command to righteousness. Then he would say: "If you lay siege to a fortress and its inhabitants entreat you to grant them a covenant of peace from Allah and His Messenger, grant them a covenant from yourselves, for indeed it is easier for you to fulfil your own covenant than to fulfil the covenant of Allah and His Messenger. Also, if you lay siege to a fortress and its inhabitants implore you to submit them to the judgment of Allah and His Messenger, submit them to your judgment, for indeed you do not know if you will correctly arrive at the judgment of Allah and His Messenger." [Sahīb Muslim (1731)]

What we understand Islamic Law to be in a particular instant is not necessarily a reflection of what Allah and His Messenger have decided. We have seen where the Prophet prevented his Companions from abusing the desert-dweller who urinated in the corner of the mosque. He also rebuked some of them for insisting that an injured man take a full ritual bath, which ultimately resulted in that man's death. The Prophet scolded them by saying: "They have killed him, and may Allah deal with them. Would they not

have asked about it? Asking is the remedy for uncertainty." [Sunan Abī Dāwūd (336, 337) and Sunan Ibn Mājah (572)]

The Companions who advised the man to bathe were relying upon the literal meaning of the sacred texts. What they had failed to consider were the particular circumstances of the man's predicament and the legal rational that would have to be taken into account in that context. This requires a more sensitive and nuanced understanding that only experienced jurists have.

2. We must uphold justice at all times.

Ammār, the eminent Companion, once said: "Justice is to be applied on yourself, the greeting of peace is for the world, and you should spend in charity even if you possess little." [Sahīb al-Bukhārī in the "Book of Faith"]

Justice is a precious quality to possess. To be just, you must be able to place others on the same footing as yourself. Justice is something important and necessary. From it spring many rules that are relevant to the etiquettes of disagreement. Among these rules are the following:

A. That which is established with certainty cannot be overturned except with certainty.

For instance, the religious convictions of people known to be Muslims cannot be called into question without unequivocal evidence attesting to their unbelief. The same can be said for people's presumed innocence, their good reputation, and their rights.

B. Mistaking someone for a believer is far less serious than mistaking someone for an unbeliever.

This means that if you deem someone to be a Muslim on the basis of outward conduct, it is a relatively small matter if in truth that person is a hypocrite. This is not the case if you declare someone to be an unbeliever. You are taking a serious risk. The Prophet has warned us: "Whoever calls someone else an unbeliever

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or declares him an enemy of Allah when it is not the case, then his statement will return back and apply to him.” [Sahīb Muslim (610)]

C. In matters that are open to juristic discretion and multiple points of view, there is no justification for calling people sinners or ostracising them.

Ibn Taymiyah mentioned that those who follow the Sunnah do not regard the exercise of juristic discretion in matters of religion as sinful, whether the question at hand is major or minor. Those who are competent to look into matters of religion and exert their utmost efforts to determine Allah’s ruling on a matter will incur no sin on account of the conclusions that they reach. In fact, they will either receive a single reward or a double reward from Allah, depending on the correctness of their conclusions. Because of this, differences of opinion in these matters should never be a cause of dissension between believers or a pretext for ostracism.

D. People should not be cursed or branded unbelievers.

Ahmad b. Hanbal declared the heretical claims of the Jahmiyyah to be disbelief, but he never declared anyone who held those beliefs to be an unbeliever, not even al-Ma'mun who persecuted him. Instead, he prayed to Allah to forgive them.

It is a methodological principle among all Muslims who follow the Sunnah that no one is to be branded an unbeliever on account of a mistake. Ibn Rajab said:

Most of the great jurists made mistakes in a few matters. This does not in any way detract from their reputations or from their knowledge. Their mistakes are overshadowed by the vastness of their knowledge, the purity of their intentions, and their defense of the faith.

Digging up their mistakes is not a praiseworthy endeavor nor is it worthy of any reward, especially when the mistakes are in minor issues where error is not so serious and where correcting such errors provides no real benefit.

What Ibn Rajab said has relevance for today. It is not right how some people go about compiling all the errors someone has made to publish those errors in a book or on a website. It is wrong even if the information is accurate. This is the wrong emphasis. It ignores all of that person’s good opinions and good work. It is a form of aggression.

The strange thing is how people can go to great pains to avoid eating anything unlawful or inadvertently seeing a dirty picture, but they cannot seem to control their tongues in the least bit when it comes to the reputations of others. They speak about the living and the dead without hesitation. Al-Dhahabī said:

Whatever colleagues may say against one another should not be taken seriously, especially when antagonism, rivalry, or ideological differences exist between them. Few are the people who, by Allah’s grace, can avoid speaking badly of others in such situations. I know of no generation in history whose people were able to avoid this sin besides the Prophets and their most pious followers. If I wanted to, I could fill up volumes of pages with examples to prove what I am saying.

Ahmad b. Hanbal once asked some of his students where they had been. They replied that they had been attending Abū Kurayb’s classes. Now Abū Kurayb used to speak ill of Ahmad and criticize his views. However, Ahmad said to these students: “Quite a good man he is! Take knowledge from him and learn from him.”

The students, in surprise, said: “He speaks so badly about you.”

Ahmad replied: “What can I do about that? He is just a man who is greatly troubled by me.”

Al-Dhahabī had the following to say about Ibn Hazm, the controversial sheikh of the Dhāhirī school of thought:

I am sympathetic towards Ibn Hazm because of his love for authentic hadith and his knowledge on that subject, though there are many things that he says about narrators and

defects in transmission that I do not agree with. He has many views in Islamic Law about which I am certain he is mistaken. However, I do not consider him as an unbeliever or as a person who went astray. I pray that Allah forgives him and grants him clemency, as I pray for all Muslims. I also admit to his brilliance and extensive knowledge.

It is a simple matter of justice to accept the truth when it comes from your opponent, even if he or she happens to be a person of bad character or unorthodox beliefs, or professes a different religion.

Ibn Taymiyah disapproved of the conduct of some defenders of the Sunnah when they refused to acknowledge the truth when it came from a peripatetic philosopher or scholastic theologian, simply because of their distaste for such people. He said: "We are not permitted to refuse to acknowledge the truth when it is spoken by a Jew or Christian, or even a sectarian slanderer of the Prophet's Companions. We are simply to reject falsehood and accept the truth."

Sheikh 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Sa`dī writes in his commentary of the Qur'ān: "When a scholar speaks about the statements of the people of deviance, he is obliged to give everyone their due and acknowledge the truth in what they say as well as clarify their falsehood. He must consider how close to the truth they are or how far away."

3. We must be patient, forbearing, and respond to abuse with kindness.

Allah says: "Good and evil are not equal. Repel evil with what is better. Then he between whom and you there was so much hatred will become as a dear friend." [Sūrah Fussilat: 34]

This is how the Prophet won over the hearts of his enemies. A true word, when accompanied with a sincere smile and good manners, can put an end to enmity. Allah says: "And no one will be granted such goodness except those who exercise patience and self-restraint – none but persons of the greatest good fortune." [Sūrah Fussilat: 35]

We should not be excessive in rebuking others and calling them to account. We should not seek to get revenge or go too far in defending ourselves.

There is a lesson for us in the indirect way the Prophet used to reprimand his followers. Once, he found out that people were keeping aloof from certain activities that he permitted, so he said: "What is with certain people that they disdain doing something that I do, for by Allah, I am the most knowledgeable of them about Allah and fear Him the most." [Sahīh al-Bukhārī (6101) and Sahīh Muslim (2356)]

4. We must avoid bigotry and partisanship.

It is wrong to become chauvinistic towards a certain approach, school of thought, or group. Chauvinism and bigotry blind people and make them unable to differentiate truth from falsehood. The same fervour with which a person loves something can easily be turned to hatred. This is why 'Alī b. Abī Tālib said: "Love the one you love in moderation, for perhaps one day he may be your most hated enemy. And hate the one you hate in moderation, for perhaps one day he will become someone you love." [Musannaf Ibn Abī Shaybab (35876)]

The objects of fanatical love and loyalty often detest the fanaticism they attract, but they are afflicted by over-eager followers. On the death of Ahmad b. Hanbal, the scholar Muhammad b. Yahyā al-Naysābūrī was so stricken with grief that he said: "It is the due of every household in Baghdad to bewail the death of Imām Ahmad."

Al-Dhahabī writes: "Indeed, al-Naysābūrī spoke like that on account of his grief and not according to the dictates of Islam, for wailing at the time of death is prohibited by Islamic Law."

His slip was mild. It was said that in Khorasan, some people thought that Ahmad b. Hanbal was an angel and not a human being. Others said that looking upon his face was like being engaged in worship for a year. Excessiveness like this is reprehensible indeed.

Ahmad himself was a very humble man who disdained all ostentation. However, these extreme statements were made by

people who should have known better, but who were carried away by the strength of their emotions.

I read the following statement on a website: "Ibn Bāz is *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā`ah* (the Muslim Community following the Sunnah). And if you wish, al-Albānī as well."

Now, I will say without the least hesitation that both of these people are among the many great scholars of our time. However, it is very difficult to accept someone saying this one man constitutes the entire Muslim community – whether he be Ibn Bāz or al-Albānī.

Allah has placed abundant good in the Muslim community. He has bestowed various gifts on various people and blessed them with different aptitudes and knowledge of different things. To say that all of this is in one man and that everyone is obliged to follow him is a serious mistake. It goes against the very principles that those scholars followed. No one after the Prophet deserves our unqualified obedience, and no one has a monopoly on the truth.

When Ibn Bāz was the Grand Muftī of Saudi Arabia, he did not consider his opinion to be binding on the people. He considered the views of others to be as important as his own. The opinions of everyone were to be evaluated, then accepted or rejected on the basis of the evidence. Ibn Bāz never asked for anything more than this for his own opinions.

Chauvinism and bigotry cause people to deride those who are not with them in their bigotry. Once, a jurists from the city of Kufah performed the pilgrimage and met with the scholars of Western Arabia – people like 'Atā', Tā'ūs, and Sa`īd b. Jubayr. When he returned to Iraq, he said: "O People of Kufah! Be glad, for I swear by Allah that you alone are the people of Islamic knowledge in this day and time. The jurists of Western Arabia are in knowledge like your children... the smallest of your children."

We often hear people speaking like this about others because they follow a different school of thought or affiliate themselves with a different group. How often do we hear people say that someone has no knowledge or no worth whatsoever? This is most unfortunate indeed.

Managing Disagreement

Conflict management is a science that is studied today. Libraries can be filled with the number of books which have been written on the subject. With respect to disagreements among Muslims on matters of religion, the following values should be upheld:

1. Adherence to Agreed-Upon Principles

For Muslims, this means strict adherence to the Qur'an and Sunnah by all parties. Allah repeatedly emphasizes this principle in the Qur'an: "Whatever you disagree about, its resolution is with Allah." [Sūrah al-Shūrā: 10]

"If you disagree about something, refer it back to Allah and His Messenger if you believe in Allah and the Last Day." [Sūrah al-Nisā': 59]

Allah specifically refers to the Qur'an when He says: "Truly, this Qur'an guides to what is most correct." [Sūrah al-Isrā': 9]

Likewise, He makes specific reference to the Sunnah when He says: "Truly you have in Allah's Messenger an excellent example of conduct for those whose hopes are in Allah and the Last Day and who remember Allah often." [Sūrah al-Abzāb: 21]

This is a defining point of convergence for all Muslims. However, we must be vigilant not to confuse our own opinions and interpretations with the definitive pronouncements of the Qur'an and Sunnah. If we argue that the textual evidence is what matters, we must be aware that how we understand the texts may be right or wrong. It is important to always keep this distinction in mind.

2. Dialogue

Dialogue can only take place between parties who disagree with one another. Allah has commanded us to argue in the best manner even when we are engaging those who disagree with us in basic principles of faith, like the Jews and Christians. "Do not argue with the People of the Scripture except with what is best, save with those among them who perpetrate injustice." [Sūrah al-Ankabūt: 46]

As long as it is possible to engage in dialogue, those of us who are able to do so are obliged to do so in the best possible manner

In the Qur'an, Allah relates to us the following dialogue that occurred between Him and Satan with respect to Adam: "He said: 'O Satan, what has prevented you from bowing down to what I created with my own hand. Were you being prideful or are you among the haughty?' (Satan) said: 'I am better than him. You created me from fire and created him from mud'." [Sūrah Sād: 75-76]

Dialogue has etiquettes that must be observed, whether it occurs between different groups and sects, or between countries and nations. Most importantly, there must be a climate of openness where people are free to express their opinions. In such a climate, false ideas perish and the truth thrives.

Dialogue can turn adversaries and contentious rivals into a single harmonious community. Allah says: "It was by the mercy of Allah that you were lenient with them (O Muhammad), for if you had been stern and fierce of heart they would have dispersed from around you." [Sūrah Al 'Imrān: 159]

Civil discussion is a way for people to arrive at the truth. It is also a way to reconcile those who have differences. As for the political, religious, and ideological debates we watch on television, some of them are sensible and clement. These rare programs are good to watch, because they teach people how to listen and respect the views of others. Unfortunately, usually the only intention of the participants is to gain support or display their debating skills, regardless of the truth and without seeking to arrive at any productive conclusions. Watching such debates is at best a waste of time and at worst a way to polarize people and make them more obstinate. Such debates neither dispel falsehood nor bring people closer to the truth. They just provide media broadcasters with a larger range of sensational programming.

3. Consultation

Allah commands us to engage in consultation. He says to His Messenger: "So pardon them and seek forgiveness for them and consult them in affairs." [Sūrah Al 'Imrān: 159]

He also describes the believers who attain success as: "Those who have responded to their Lord, established prayer, and whose affairs are determined by consultation among themselves." [Sūrah al-Shūrā: 38]

The Prophet consulted with his Companions whenever a matter confronted them that concerned the community's welfare. It is extremely important to instil the principle of consultation in our schools and on the national level. The people must be able to actively participate in deciding the policies of today and setting their course for tomorrow. We must take extra care to include the younger generations in this process. They must be allowed to voice their concerns. Their pains and aspirations must be felt. We cannot impose our own opinions on them and we must not marginalise them. In our present situation, they must not be alienated. It is our duty to hear them out and to speak to them frankly and truthfully.

4. Listening to Each Other

This is one of the most crucial elements of dialogue. However, it requires a number of skills. The first of these is to be able to remain silent while the other person is speaking. Another is to look at the person who is addressing you. Another is to remain calm. It is also important to take notes not only of points you wish to respond to, but also points that provide you with benefit. Then there is the skill of knowing how and when to ask for clarification.

It is important for all speakers to be placed on an equal footing, even if the discussion is between a teacher and student, or a parent and child, or a government official and a member of the public. Every party to the discussion should be addressed by his or her name, or by the manner of address that is preferred by the people in question.

In Mecca, in the early days of Islam, 'Utbah b. Rabī'ah came up to the Prophet and said to him: "My nephew, you are to us, as you know, a person of good background, family, lineage and social standing, and you have come to your people with a weighty matter. You have broken their unity, belittled their hopes, criticised their gods and their faith, and rejected their forefathers ways. So listen to

what I propose to you, and consider it. Perhaps you will find some of it acceptable."

The Prophet replied: "Speak, father of al-Walīd⁵, I am listening."

He said: "My nephew, if wealth is what you are seeking through what you bring to us, then we will gather together from our wealth what will make you the richest person among us. If what you want is prestige, we will make you our chief citizen and no decision will be taken by us without your leave. Indeed, if kingship is your desire, we will make you our king."

He continued to make offers like this, and the Prophet continued to listen in respectful silence until he had finished. When 'Utbah b. Rabī'ah stopped talking, the Prophet said: "Have you finished, father of al-Walīd?" When 'Utbah confirmed that he had said what he needed to say, the Prophet started speaking: "Now listen to what I have to say." Then he recited from the Qur'an until he came to the verse: "But if they turn away, say: I have warned you of a scourge like the scourge that befell the people of 'Ad and Thamūd." [Sūrah Fussilat: 14]

5. Acting Upon Points of Agreement

This was an important principle of Rashīd Ridā. He used to say: "We must cooperate in matters wherein we agree and excuse one another in those wherein we disagree."

Ibn Taymiyah made the point many times that if a non-Muslim accepts Islam at the hands of some Muslims with misguided beliefs, it is better than if that person had remained an unbeliever. He also said that if a sinner repents after hearing a weak hadīth, it is better than if that person remained a sinner. Likewise, praying behind a Muslim who is somewhat deviant in religious practice is better than abandoning congregational prayer. [Majmū` al-Fatāwā (13/96) and (23/353-354)]

⁵ Referring to someone as the father of one of their children was a highly respectful form of address in Arabian culture.

The principle of acting together upon what we have in common ensures the general welfare. Muslims need to act upon this principle today more than ever. The scope wherein we agree in religious matters is wider than we might think. The scope in which our worldly interests overlap with those of other people is even greater.

Allah enjoins upon us to cooperate with everybody in righteousness and piety. What matters is that our common endeavour is a good one. He has forbidden us from cooperating with people in sin and transgression, regardless of who they are. In this way, Allah has defined for us the limits of cooperation, but He has not placed restraints on who we can cooperate with.

Furthermore, Allah says: "Allah does not forbid you, with regard to those who do not fight you for (your) faith nor drive you from your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loves those who are just." [Sūrah al-Mumtahanah: 8]

He also says: "O humankind! Verily We created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes to get to know one another. Verily the most honoured of you with Allah are those who are the most pious among you." [Sūrah al-Hujurāt: 13]

These verses show us that our cooperation with people extends to those who are far and near, to those who are familiar to us and those who are different. Likewise, we are prohibited from dealing in sin and transgression with anyone, no matter how familiar or close to us they may be.

When Allah says: "Help one another in righteousness and piety" [Sūrah al-Mā'idah: 2], He refrains from making any reference to the other party we are to engage with, so that the verse can encompass every act of righteousness conceivable.

This is why Prophet Muhammad said during the drafting of the peace treaty of Hudaybiyah between the Muslims and the Meccans: "Any provision they ask for that upholds Allah's sanctity, I will grant it." [Sabib al-Bukhārī (2731)]

Likewise he said about a covenant between various Meccan factions that he was party to before the advent of Islam: "If I am called to honour it today, I will honour it." [Sunan al-Bayhaqī (6/367)] This covenant was an alliance governing commercial

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dealings known as the League of the Virtuous, and its main provisions were respect for the principles of justice, and to collectively intervene in conflicts to establish justice. We can see how the Prophet honoured the principle of cooperation with those who were openly opposed to his faith. How should we be, then, with those who are not hostile to us? And furthermore, how should we be with those who merely differ from us in their school of thought or in their opinions?

6. Encouragement of Thinking

The environment must be made conducive for intellectual stimulation and growth. A climate of freedom is needed to nurture ideas that are good and sound. Intellectual activity withers away and dies in a climate where a person has to think a thousand times before uttering a word because of the fear of reprisal for saying something the least bit suspect.

Take the story of the Caliph 'Umar and the young Ibn 'Abbās. 'Umar had alarmed the elders of society by seating Ibn 'Abbās among the men. They exclaimed: "How can you seat this adolescent among us when we have children his age?"

Then 'Umar asked them about the meaning of the short chapter of the Qur'an entitled *Sūrah al-Nasr*:

When the help of Allah and the victory comes, and you see the people entering Allah's religion in droves, then glorify the praises of your Lord and seek His forgiveness. Indeed He is ever ready to show mercy.

None of the elders could provide an adequate answer. Some of them said: "Allah is commanding us to praise Him and seek His forgiveness whenever He helps us and grants us a victory." Others admitted that they did not know, or simply remained silent.

Then 'Umar turned to Ibn 'Abbās and asked him. Ibn 'Abbās insightfully and correctly replied: "I see it as foretelling naught but the death of Allah's Messenger."

Then 'Umar said to him: "What I know about this is the same as what you know." [Sahih al-Bukhārī (4294)]

Muslims today, especially those who wish to speak about Islam and work for the religion, need to be able to express their opinions freely, without fear of persecution.

7. Welcoming Criticism

This applies to affairs of state and social concerns as well as issues relating to Islamic work and Islamic knowledge. We should always be open to submitting our practices, habits and assumptions to a sober and objective critical review. We can never assume that our present state of affairs is the best that can possibly be achieved. We all admit that our present circumstances are in need of improvement. Constructive and informed criticism is the first step we must take to improve our situation.

Some people think that dictatorship achieves unity. A dictatorship can be a political one that suppressed the people's freedom of expression, but it can also be intellectual, where one opinion is forced upon everyone and disagreement is censured. In fact, dictatorship deceives people instead of unifying them.

General circumstances are constantly changing and this produces pressures in society that the people must respond to, leading them, willingly or unwillingly, into conflict with the political or social status quo. People living under a repressive regime are unable to develop a natural response to societal change. Inevitably, there is going to be a rupture.

What dictatorship actually does is prevent the development of true social cohesion and initiative. This is why, when people finally do get their freedom, they are ill equipped to cope with it or handle the responsibility that comes with it. This leads to instability and unrest. However, we should not be deceived into thinking this state of affairs is the consequence of freedom. It is just a stage that the people must pass through once they win their freedom. This instability is not permanent.

8. Enjoining Right Conduct and Forbidding Wrongdoing

This is one of the hallmarks of the faithful. Allah says: "They are protecting friends of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong." [Surah al-Tawbah: 71]

Carrying out this duty should be the crux of the relationship between scholars, students, Islamic workers, and the general public. However, the following points must be observed:

A. No one should be denounced on account of any opinion that is open to scholarly disagreement. Those who arrive at different conclusions are deserving of Allah's reward, even if only one opinion is actually correct in His eternal knowledge. The prohibition on denouncing someone does not mean that people must stop advising each other and expressing their disapproval of a certain point of view. Indeed, in some questions, the evidence clearly and unambiguously points to one correct answer. In such cases, it is better to offer guidance and direction in an appropriate manner.

B. A person who relies upon the expertise of another has no right to criticize a person who follows someone else. Since each of them is arriving at their conclusions by relying on others, they have no basis upon which to criticize one another.

C. Good advice should be given politely. Advice, by its very nature, can be given in all matters. The great jurist Al-Shāfi`ī said: "I never tell a man who disagrees with me to repent to Allah for his opinion. Repentance is for sins, whereas this man is in any case rewarded with either a single or double reward." When we consider the examples al-Shāfi`ī and other scholars give in this context, we can appreciate just how wide they regarded the scope of disagreement to be.

D. The potential benefits and harm that might come from denouncing something wrong must be taken into consideration.

E. Forbidding something wrong should be approached gradually. It is difficult for people to change their habits. The famous jurist, al-`Izz b. `Abd al-Salām makes the point that if no positive results are to come out of enjoining the right or forbidding the wrong, then it is not obligatory to do so.

Al-Shinqītī makes the same observation when he discusses the meaning of the verse: "O you who believe! Guard your own souls. If you follow (right) guidance, no harm can come to you from those who stray." [Surah al-Mā'idah: 105]

F. It is necessary to exercise restraint and patience. Allah says: "And if there should be a group among you who has believed in that with which I have been sent and a group that has not believed, then be patient until Allah judges between us. And He is the best of judges." [Surah al-A`rāf: 87]

When we read about the life of the Prophet, and likewise if we look into Islamic Law, we find many examples of truces, peace agreements, and covenants. This should make us always consider what course of action the circumstances require. It is better for people to live with each other amicably and without serious conflict.

G. The practicality of the matter needs to be taken into account. This does not just refer to material capabilities, but also to the practical outcomes of changing the situation. What good or what harm will come of it?

The Prophet took this into consideration when he refrained from expanding the Ka`bah so that it could be restored to the original foundations that Abraham had built it upon. He considered the greater social welfare that would be secured by leaving the Ka`bah as it was.

9. Transparency

Issues must be made clear and transparent. Disagreements should not be glossed over or trivialized. Sometimes, people are tempted to overlook or dismiss serious problems due to their partiality for others. This is like having a sick person go to the hospital and being given a clean bill of health even though all the medical tests indicate that the patient is deathly ill.

We must be frank and open about the matters wherein we differ. However, our purpose in doing so should always be to either overcome our differences or to at least prevent those differences from causing harm. Clarity in articulating our disagreements should not be mistaken for belligerence.

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10. Clarifying Misunderstandings

Every effort must be made to ascertain that there are no misunderstandings. Disagreements are often simply cases of miscommunication. Sometimes the outlook or biases of a listener affects how the speaker's argument is understood. Personal feelings can get in the way. A lack of sufficient knowledge can also prevent proper understanding. As a consequence, the broader implications of a certain idea or opinion go unappreciated. When people differ, what they need most is to understand each other properly. They must refrain from reacting emotionally and jumping to hasty conclusions.

11. Conflict Management as a Discipline

The subject of conflict management must be seriously studied. This is a contemporary discipline. Many books have been written covering the management of a wide range of interpersonal, organizational, and societal conflicts. There is benefit to be found in them.

What this field of study teaches us is that, if managed with intelligence, disagreement can be turned into an opportunity for greater productivity and positive competition. It can lead to more complete solutions and a greater flow of expertise between people who hail from different disciplines. Conflict management has been harnessed effectively to increase production and accelerate development. Muslims should avail themselves of this knowledge and its potential applications in public policy, economics, and Islamic work.

The Hadith of the 72 Sects

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "The Children of Israel divided into 72 sects. My community will divide into 73 sects, and all of them will be in the Hellfire save one."

The people asked him: "And which one will that be?"

He replied: "The one that follows what I and my Companions are upon right now." [Sunan al-Tirmidhi (2640,2641), Sunan Abi Dawūd (4596, 4597) and Sunan Ibn Mājah (3991-3993)]

This hadith is quite famous and it is mentioned all of the time. In fact, scarcely does anyone speak on the topic of disagreement without mentioning it, though it is often cited inappropriately and to audiences who cannot fully appreciate its implications. Therefore, I wish to discuss this hadith and elucidate more clearly what it is telling us.

This hadith is not recorded in either *Sahih al-Bukhārī* or *Sahih Muslim*. This by no means implies that the hadīth is unauthentic. However, it is possible that they did not mention it because it was not up to their arduous standards of authenticity. It can be found in the four *Sunan* works and in *Musnad Ahmad* with different chains of transmission. Some hadith specialists have classified it as authentic or at least sound, including al-Tirmidhī, al-Hākim, al-Dhahabī, Ibn Taymiyah, al-Shātibī, and Ibn Hajar al-`Asqalānī. Others have judged it to be weak, including ibn Hazm and Ibn al-Wazīr.

The most correct opinion is that it is authentic; taking into consideration the large number of ways it has reached us, with some chains of transmission strengthening the deficiencies of others. Nevertheless, we should not behave as if it is the only hadith in the world that addresses this issue.

For instance, the Prophet has conveyed to us Allah's promise that "There will always be among the Muslims a divinely supported group who will prevail. They will neither be harmed by those who forsake them nor by those who go against them. This will be the case until the Command of Allah comes while they still prevail." [Sahih al-Bukhārī (3640) and Sahih Muslim (1037)]

He also said: "Allah will bring forth for this community at the start of every 100 years someone to renew the faith." [Sunan Abi Dawūd (4291)]

These authentically narrated statements from the Prophet show us that the truth will continue to prevail within the Muslim community and that it will continue to be renewed and restored.

The Muslim community is most highly esteemed by Allah. The Qur'an and Sunnah state this fact in unambiguous terms. It is better than the communities that followed the previous scriptures were in their own era, namely the Jews and the Christians. This is why Allah

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says: "You are the best community brought forth for humanity." [Sūrah Al-`Imrān: 110]

This is also why He says: "And likewise we made you a balanced nation." [Sūrah al-Baqarah: 143]

The Prophet on many occasions emphasized the fact that the Muslim community is the best community of faith on Earth. Therefore, no one should ever infer from the hadith about the 73 sects that the previous communities of faith were less divided amongst themselves and therefore were somehow better or less afflicted.

Ibn Mas`ūd relates that he was with some people when the Prophet asked them: "Would you like to be one quarter of the population of Paradise?" When they replied that they would indeed like that, the Prophet asked them: "Would you like to be one third of the population of Paradise?" When they replied that they would like that, the Prophet asked them: "Would you like to be one half of the population of Paradise?" When they replied that they would like that, the Prophet said: "I swear by Him in whose hand is Muhammad's soul, I hope that you will be half the population of Paradise. This is because none shall enter Paradise except a soul that has surrendered to Allah, and you are to the polytheists like a single white hair on the hide of a black bull or a single black hair on the hide of a red bull." [Saḥīb al-Bukhārī (3348, 6528) and Saḥīb Muslim (221)]

In this hadith, the Prophet made it clear that half of the denizens of Paradise will be from among his followers.

Moreover, Allah in His mercy has forgiven this community what it falls into by mistake or out of forgetfulness. We are instructed by the Qur'an to offer the following supplication: "Our Lord, do not impose blame on us if we forget or err." [Sūrah al-Baqarah: 286]

The Prophet said: 'Allah has pardoned my community what it commits by mistake, out of forgetfulness, or out of compulsion.' This is an indisputable principle of Islamic jurisprudence recognized by all scholars and jurists.

Moreover, Allah has spared this community from the burdens and impositions that the previous religious communities had been

obliged to follow. Allah says: "He releases them from their heavy burdens and from the yokes that are upon them." [Sūrah al-A'rāf: 157]

Returning to the hadith about the 73 sects, the fact that the Muslims will divide into a larger number of sects has puzzled some scholars throughout the ages. However, there are a number of possible answers to this puzzle.

First of all, the Muslim era is the longest era for any religious community without another coming to succeed it.

Secondly, the divisions within the Muslim community are far less serious than the divisions suffered by those who have gone before. The deficiencies brought about by the divisions among Muslims are more than counterbalanced by the good and the favour that the Muslims possess.

Moreover, the existence of a sect does not require that the sect has many followers. One person following his own ideas can constitute a sect. Therefore, it is quite possible for there to be 72 other sects that collectively constitute a small percentage of the entire Muslim community.

The real problem exists with those who fancy themselves as the "saved sect" to the exclusion of all others, declaring everyone else to be astray and damning them. The Prophet warned us: "If a man says that the people are damned, then he is the damnedest of them all." [Saḥīb Muslim (2623)]

We must bear in mind that the Prophet described those other 72 sects as Muslims. He said: "My community will divide into 73 sects." This means that the followers of those sects are neither unbelievers nor polytheists. They are, in general, Muslims and believers. This does not mean that there cannot be a few hypocrites and unbelievers among them. However, the overwhelming majority of them believe, in spite of their deviance and their shortcomings. This is the way that most of the scholars have understood the hadith of the 73 sects, including Ibn Taymiyah and al-Shātibī.

The threat of the Hellfire mentioned in the hadith does not mean that the threat is going to be carried out against everyone. Ibn Taymiyah makes the following observation:

This hadith is no graver in its threat than the verse: "Verily, those who consume the orphans' property unjustly merely take fire into their bellies and they shall be scorched by a blazing flame." [Sūrah al-Nisā':10]

It is no graver than the verse: "Whoever does this maliciously and wrongly We shall scorch in the Fire." [Sūrah al-Nisā': 30]

In spite of these verses, we do not bear witness that specific people are going to Hell, since people may repent for their sins or they may have other good deeds to their credit that blot out their sins. Allah may expiate them for their wrongs by afflicting them with hardships or by other means.

It was not the practice of our pious predecessors to concern themselves with identifying these sects. Al-Shātibī emphasises this point in his book *al-Muwāfaqāt*. Ibn Taymiyah also states this in a number of his works. He says:

Anyone from one of the 72 other sects who is a hypocrite is indeed an unbeliever in his heart. Those from among them who are not a hypocrites but who in fact believe in Allah and His Messenger are not an unbelievers, regardless of whatever mistakes in interpretation they may have.

When one of the faithful beseeches Allah saying: "Our Lord, forgive us and our brothers who have preceded us in faith" [from Sūrah al-Hashr: 10], he is speaking about all the Muslims of the past centuries, even those who made mistakes in interpretation, acted contrary to the Sunnah, or committed some sins. They are still from his brothers who preceded him in faith and they all come under the generality of his supplication, even if they had belonged to one of the 72 other sects. Each one of these sects contains within its ranks a large number of people who are not unbelievers. They are believers who have gone somewhat astray and have sinned, making them worthy of the threat of punishment.

The hadith of the 73 sects should be seen in the proper perspective. Though we might view it as authentic, we should not extend its meaning beyond what it actually says. We should not allow it to be used to stir up arguments and aggravate divisions.

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Praiseworthy & Blameworthy Disagreement

If we consider the way the Qur'an and Sunnah speak about the concepts of division and disagreement, we can see that they are regarded differently. Division is always condemned. However, disagreement is not always bad. Sometimes it is praiseworthy, and sometimes it is blameworthy.

Disagreements are differences in point of view or understanding, or even in matters of taste or preference. Then there are practical differences, where one person employs his or her efforts to a certain task while someone else focuses on another task.

Division, on the other hand, results when people become polarized into antagonistic groups. Allah says: "Be not like those who are divided amongst themselves..." [Sūrah Al 'Imrān: 105]

This is a clear prohibition of becoming divided. However, the verse continues: "...and fall into disagreement after clear evidence has come to them." This indicates that disagreements encompass that which is acceptable and unacceptable – or at the very least, the disagreement might be excusable or inexcusable.

There is a clear standard here for distinguishing when disagreements are acceptable or not. When the disagreement has a sound basis for it, any party to that disagreement will either be in a praiseworthy position, or in one where he or she at least has an excuse for adopting a particular stance.

It is because of this that the Prophet said: "If a judge gives a ruling, exercising his best judgment, and he is correct, he will receive a double reward. If he gives a ruling, exercising his best judgment, and makes a mistake, then he will receive a single reward." [Sahīh al-Bukhārī (7352) and Sahīh Muslim (1716)]

Observe how the Prophet explicitly says the judge "makes a mistake". In spite of being mistaken, he receives a single blessing for exercising his best judgment (*ijtihād*). This is Allah's mercy. If a person who is sufficiently qualified in knowledge exercises his or her best judgment, then the effort is blessed, whether her or she arrives at the correct answer or makes a mistake. In this way, Allah encourages us to exercise our judgment in matters wherein we

possess sufficient knowledge and proficiency. Allah encourages us by promising to bless for doing so, even if we make a mistake.

Such disagreements are praiseworthy as long as they based on legitimate arguments and evidence, matters which are open to debate where those who hold differing opinions do so sincerely after exercising their best efforts to arrive at the truth. By contrast, disagreements based on vain desires, vested interests, and arrogance are blameworthy. Such disagreements lead people to become polarized and divided among themselves.

Diversity vs. Opposition

There is, finally, another way that people differ which is certainly praiseworthy. This is the diversity of human activity, where people opt to devote their efforts to various good things. Consider Islamic work. Some people focus on Islamic legal matters. Others engage in calling people to righteousness. Some seek to reconcile people and bring about peace. Others deal with family matters and domestic problems. Still others engage in relief work. Some teach. Some build mosques. Some practice medicine. The list goes on. Such differences only serve to enrich and strengthen society.

This praiseworthy diversity encompasses the various sciences, skills and specialisations that society needs, like policy, management, and economics. There need to people who excel in the various specialised branches of knowledge and who are proficient in different vocations. People are naturally attracted to different fields. They have different aptitudes and interests, so they can become experts in their chosen field and bring about creative solutions to fulfil society's needs. The body of human knowledge grows in this way, as each generation of experts builds on what its predecessors have contributed.

Even in the Islamic sciences, there is praiseworthy diversity. We see this in the various wordings of our prescribed supplications and in the various ways we perform the night prayer. Many acts of worship have a range of recommended practices associated with them, and it is recommended for a worshipper to put them into practice at various times.

Then there are questions of Islamic Law for which there is no clear textual evidence. These are the questions which Muslim jurists have been exploring and discussing since the time of the Pious Predecessors, indeed since the time of the Companions. It is not possible in these questions to determine with certainty which of their opinions is correct. This is why some people say that every qualified jurist who exercises his or her judgement is right. This well-known assertion can be understood in two ways:

1. That each qualified jurist has actually arrived at the correct answer.
2. That each of them has done the right thing by the exercising their best judgment in the matter.

The second understanding is the one favoured by most scholars. The jurist who exercises his or her judgment will be rewarded by Allah, whether or not the answer arrived at is the correct one. However, the reward is double if the jurist is correct, because of what the Prophet said. In either case, the jurist is right for using the right approach. That does not mean that the actual answer arrived at is right as well.

This, then, is also a form of praiseworthy diversity. A number of scholars have said that the disagreements of the Companions are a mercy for the Muslims. Ibn Qudāmah writes in his treatise on theology *Lum`ah al-Itqād*: “Their disagreements are a mercy and a source of flexibility. When they agree, their agreement is a decisive proof.”

The Shāfi`ī scholar Muhammad b. `Abd al-Rahmān devoted an entire book to this topic, entitled *The Mercy Shown to the Muslim Community through the Scholars' Disagreements*.

Some people claim that the Prophet said: “My community’s disagreement is a mercy.” This attribution is incorrect. There is no line of transmission to establish it. However, the meaning of the statement is valid, since it pertains to the welcome diversity of opinion that brings with it flexibility and leniency.

Can Opposition Ever Be Praiseworthy?

Sometimes, the types of Islamic legal issues we have been discussing above lead to opinions which are diametrically opposed to one another. As long as these opinions were arrived at by scholars exercising their best efforts with valid evidence and arguments, then their disagreement is still praiseworthy. However if it leads to division among Muslims or becomes a source of chauvinism and intellectual bigotry, then it becomes blameworthy.

We should consider the example the Companions set for us. Ibn Mas`ūd performed the Pilgrimage during the reign of the Caliph `Uthmān. At the time when the pilgrims were gathered in Mīnā, `Uthmān offered the noon prayer as a four-unit prayer. When Ibn Mas`ūd heard about this, he exclaimed in astonishment and said: “I prayed in Mīnā with the Prophet two units of prayer. I did likewise with Abū Bakr and `Umar. Would that my share of these four units be that of two units of prayer accepted by Allah.” [Sahīh al-Bukhārī (1084) and Sahīh Muslim (695)]

In spite of his astonishment at `Uthmān’s decision and his open disagreement to it, he offered four units of prayer himself. When people asked him about this, he said: “Disagreement is worse.” [Sunan Abī Dāwūd (1960)]

`Uthmān had various reasons why he went against the established practice of shortening the noon prayer from four to two units in Mīnā during the Hajj. These reasons have been discussed at length by legal scholars like Ibn al-`Arabī. Later scholars have not been convinced by `Uthmān’s reasoning and his view on the matter is regarded as being a weak one. Nevertheless, his action did not lead the Muslims to become divided. Ibn Mas`ūd continued to pray behind `Uthmān.

The Pious Predecessors would follow each other in prayer in spite of the disagreements they had with one another, even when the issue in dispute pertained directly to the validity of prayer. One of these questions is whether medicinal cupping invalidates a person’s state of ritual purity. Another is whether it is mandatory to recite “In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful” when commencing with *al-Fātiḥah* in prayer. They prayed behind one another, leaving it to the discretion of those who were leading

prayer at the time to act accord to the dictates of what they deemed to be correct.

Disagreement of a substantial nature, therefore, can still be praiseworthy. However, it can also be blameworthy. It is praiseworthy when the issues themselves lend themselves to a multiplicity of opinion, especially when the plurality of viewpoints brings with it positive effects. One positive outcome of disagreement is that it allows people to realize that they are not required to be of one mind on every issue. Another positive effect is that it stimulates the mind. When people are in agreement, they are more likely to take their assumptions for granted. When there is resistance to an idea, that is when people are forced re-examine their opinions. When this is done in an objective spirit and within the bounds of propriety, it leads to the development of better, stronger ideas and approaches to problem-solving. This is something good for society.

Blameworthy Disagreement

Alas, disagreement can also be blameworthy. This is the case when it is inspired by base motives. Some people enjoy argument for its own sake, and do not take a stance because they believe it is the truth. They are not interested in pleasing Allah with what they say. There is an old saying: "Be different and you will be noticed." Then there is disagreement born of stubborn obstinacy. We see this from some people who adhere to a particular school of thought in Islamic Law when they become more concerned with upholding their school's opinions than with objective research. This kind of disagreement, by its nature, leads to dissension. It had at times gotten to the point where some people refused to pray behind an imām who followed a different school of thought. In history, this kind of factional bigotry has even led to political strife.

The Hanbalī jurist Ibn Muflīh, in his landmark legal work, *al-Furu'*, writes the following:

Ibn al-Jawzī mentions in his book *al-Sirr al-Masūn* that he witnessed some supposedly knowledgeable people acting like the common folk. He explained that when a Hanbalī

imām leads the prayer in a predominantly Shāfi`ī mosque and fails to commence by reciting "In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful" out loud, the followers of the Shāfi`ī school get angry. Likewise, when a Shāfi`ī imām prays in a Hanbalī mosque and reads the verse out loud, the followers of Hanbalī school get angry. This is a matter which is open to juristic opinion, and becoming obstinate about it is vain behaviour that is contrary to the path of knowledge.

Ibn `Aqīl says: "Some people do not hesitate to perpetrate injustice except when they are weak. In the days of Abū Yūsuf, the Hanbalīs had the upper hand, so much so that they prevented the Shāfi`īs from reciting out loud and offering the *qunūt* supplication in prayer. Then when Abū Yūsuf died and al-Nazzām came to power, the Hanbalīs lost influence, and then the adherents of the Shāfi`ī school began to persecute them with the weight of government authority. Some people went to prison. The Hanbalī masses became the brunt of slander and the jurists were accused of heretical beliefs about Allah."

I have thought long about both groups. They did not conduct themselves like people of knowledge. In their vainglorious conduct in the mosques, they behaved more like soldiers roaming about the land.

People are excused for their disagreements in matters of Islamic Law that are based on an earnest investigation into the evidence. In fact, they are blessed for exerting their best efforts. We read in the Qur'an: "Allah burdens no soul beyond the extent of its abilities." [Sūrah al-Baqarāh: 286]

However, when clear evidence is presented that shows a certain opinion to be wrong, and someone rejects that evidence out of sheer obstinacy, then the disagreement turns blameworthy. This is why Allah says: "Be not like those who are divided amongst themselves and fall into disputations after clear evidence has reached them." [Sūrah Āl `Imrān: 105]

A person who continues to hold on to a view in the face of all the evidence to the contrary is blameworthy. This is especially true

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for religious matters. They can put themselves in real danger, for Allah says: "Let those beware who go against his (Muhammad's) order lest a trial afflict them or there befall them a painful chastisement." [Sūrah al-Nūr: 63]

Ahmad b. Hanbal said: "I was looking through the Qur'an and found that obedience to Allah's Messenger is mentioned thirty-three times." Then he recited the verse above.

Ahmad then said: "What is the greatest tribulation? It is polytheism. It is feared that if a person rejects some of what the Prophet said, his heart will be turned away from the truth, and this will lead that person to perdition." He then recited the verse: "But no, by the Lord, they can have no real faith, until they make you (O Muhammad) judge in the disputes between them." [Sūrah al-Nisā': 65]

Once someone said to Ahmad: "There are people who turn aside from one of the Prophet's hadith and go with Sufyān's opinion instead."

He replied: "How amazing it is that someone can hear a hadith and know for certain that its chain of transmission goes back soundly to the Prophet, but then discard it and give preference to the opinion of Sufyān or someone else."

The founders of all four schools of thought – Abū Hanīfah, Mālik, al-Shāfi`ī, and Ahmad – prohibited anyone to follow their opinions in contradiction to sound evidence.

A Word of Caution

There is a danger here that requires vigilance. It is possible to wrongly perceive that someone has been presented decisive evidence for a matter so they should now know the "truth" and have no excuse to persist in their old opinion. This is an easy trap to fall into. The matter might seem clear to you because of your own reasoning. It may not appear the same way to someone else. The other person may be approaching the issue from a different angle and see things that you do not.

It is always best to excuse the other person. Many matters are open for debate, even if they look decisive to you, especially if they

are matters wherein the Companions or the scholars who came after them differed. Even better than excusing the other person is to accuse yourself, for maybe the other person is actually right.

Sometimes it is hard to appreciate the other side of an argument until you know from what angle it is being approached. Once al-Shāfi`ī and Ishāq al-Rāhawayh debated the issue of whether the skin of a dead animal was purified by tanning it. They did not debate the issue for a long time. However, al-Shāfi`ī left from the argument convinced that Ishāq's opinion was correct – and Ishāq left having been won over to al-Shāfi`ī's view! This shows us they were sincere, objective, and open-minded. Debates get heated, and rarely does anyone enter into one with the intention of possibly adopting the opponents point of view.

The best way to bridge your differences with someone else is to place yourself in their shoes and imagine yourself to be an advocate for their point of view. This will help you to see things from their vantage point.

Indeed, one of the Successors said that the more knowledge you have, the more you will be able to indulge the opinions of others. Experience shows this to be true. The opposite is also true. Those who possess the least knowledge and understanding are the most stubborn and obstinate in their views. They are also more argumentative and insulting.

The Shāfi`ī jurist Abū Ishāq al-Shīrāzī observed that scholars are less partial to the school of thought they follow than members of the general public are. The scholars understand the various opinions and the arguments that back them up. They can appreciate the different points of view, whereas members of the general public only have their identification with the school, and they only know what they learn from the scholars they trust. This makes them more hostile to differing opinions. When their knowledge grows, they become more accepting of disagreement. There is an old saying that goes: "Where a knowledgeable person is hesitant, an ignorant person is perfectly sure."

Once a man came to the eminent Hanbali judge Abū Ya`la al-Farrā' and said he wished to study Hanbali Law. Abū Ya`la asked him where he came from and what school of law the people there follow. He mentioned a land to the east and said that the people

there followed the Shāfi`ī school. Upon hearing this, Abū Ya`lā advised him that if he studied Hanbalī Law and went back to his people, no one would listen to him, and he might cause dissension among them. He then recommended him to go to Abū Ishāq al-Shirāzī and learn Shāfi`ī Law from him, and then described al-Shirāzī in glowing terms.

This shows the right attitude. An Islamic scholar's job is not to promote a particular school of thought at any cost. The scholar's job is to serve knowledge for Allah's sake. There is no room for obstinacy. Consider what Abū Mūsā Yūnus al-Saddī said about al-Shāfi`ī:

I have never met anyone as sensible as al-Shāfi`ī. I once debated an issue with him, after which we went our separate ways. Later on, he came up to me, took me by the hand, and said: "O Abū Mūsā, isn't it best for us to remain brothers, even though there is a matter we can't agree on."

We can see how much al-Shāfi`ī valued brotherhood, and did not allow disagreements to get in the way of friendship.

Unity, Not Uniformity

To Be of One Heart, Not of One Mind

Our hearts are unified when they are pure and filled with brotherly love, regardless of how much we may disagree. It is good that people have different minds. That is what makes each of us unique. That is what spurs us on to creativity and new ideas. It should not destroy our love for one another.

This is what Islam teaches us. In the Qur'an and Sunnah, there are numerous clear and unambiguous texts exhorting to unity and forbidding division. This concept is a basic tenet of every Muslim's faith. The principle of coming together as a community on the basis of righteousness and obedience to Allah is clear and undisputable. The general acts of worship, like prayer, fasting, the pilgrimage, and the 'Id prayers, are all practical examples of this fact.

Islam's ethical teachings provide us with a further example, since they are also among the indisputable tenets of faith. These are values that focus on the needs of all human beings, both individually and socially, and these values cannot be realized except when people are communicating, working together, and airing their differences in a positive manner.

Allah says: "By time; verily the human being is at loss, except those who have faith, perform righteous deeds, and enjoin each other to truth and enjoin each other to patience." [Sūrah al-'Asr: 1-3]

Here Allah swears an oath that people are at loss. He exempts from this those who in addition to having faith, also enjoin each other to truth and patience. Faith is an individual experience, but the act of enjoining each other to what is right is a collective one.

The advice of the Prophet on this matter can be found in many hadith. Possibly, the most well known of these is: "Allah is pleased with three things for you...(among them) that you hold fast, all together, to the rope of Allah and do not become divided amongst yourselves." [Sahīb Muslim (1715)]

It is possible for our hearts to be united. This is within our grasp. However, it is impossible for us to be uniform in how we

think. Anyone who thinks the former depends on the latter is going to have a bleak outlook on our chances for unity.

Every Muslim is cognizant of the truth that our hearts should be unified. The problem is to put this truth into practice. Many people love their religion and have a strong desire for unity, but they lack the ability to translate this desire into a reality. Such people – though they may lament the disunity of the Muslims – usually seek to unite people around their own perspectives, opinions, and choices, a task which it is impossible for them to achieve. They should consider history, and see that people did not unite behind those who were far superior to themselves. So how can they ever be so presumptuous to expect all the people unite around them?

What is needed is a framework that accommodates differences of opinion while uniting the people around the basic principles of Islam, not around the opinions and interpretations of a specific individual or group.

In past eras, Muslim unity was understood as political unity under a single government that ruled according to Islamic guidance. This was a reality in the time of the Prophet, the era of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, and during the following era of the Islamic polities that stretched from the East to the West, and to which all the Muslims were loyal subjects.

This is why we find an impressive number of hadith that are stern about preserving this unity. For instance, the Prophet said: “Whoever abandons the community one handspan and dies in that state has died as a person in the state of ignorance before Islam.” [Sahih al-Bukhari (7054) and Sahih Muslim (1849)]

That was a bygone era. The great Muslim polity has turned into many countries that work together and squabble with each other in a manner that is so familiar to us all. Yet, the obligation for Muslim unity remains, even if it cannot be realized in the political sphere. It remains as an obligation, because the Islamic concept of governance exists to preserve the religious rights and worldly welfare of the people. This is agreed upon by all the scholars of Islamic political theory.

These goals remain, but they are transferred to preserving the essential meaning of unity, which is the wellbeing of the people in

their faith and worldly life. Among the things that the Muslims must strive for is to convey Islam’s message and open people’s hearts and minds to its teachings. Likewise, the purpose of leadership is that of organising our efforts in an efficient and effective way. This can be achieved by economic and political cooperation between countries and through well-conceived international programs that enjoy a degree of autonomy and have the capabilities to achieve goals on a scale larger than that of the nation-state.

Stumbling Blocks

There are many tendencies that obstruct our prospects for unity. One of these is the tendency to misinterpret the texts about holding fast to the community and apply them to a specific organization, party, or group. This is, without doubt, twisting these hadith to give the opposite meaning to the one intended, so they can be wielded to justify factionalism and divisiveness. Each and every group, party, or sect sees these hadith as referring to it and it alone. Its members call the masses to follow them and to give them their loyalty, and they regard anyone who refuses to do so as being recalcitrant and outside the fold of Islam. They see it as the duty of the Muslims to follow them to the exclusion of all others. They consider anyone who dies without joining them as “dying in the state of ignorance before the advent of Islam”, and as someone who will have no defence before Allah on the Day of Resurrection.

Many people have fallen victim to this way of thinking. Allah warns us of this when he says: “Every sect rejoices in that which they have.” [Surah al-Mu’minūn:53]

Another of these tendencies is for a person to engage in undermining other legitimate efforts in Islamic work, efforts which are neither deviant, nor misguided, nor contrary to Islam; efforts that are by and large correct. Such efforts may depart from that person’s own ideas in the approach taken or in specific details. They may differ in how they apply the textual evidence to specific situations. This is something unavoidable and inevitable. It is wrong for a person to lash out in speech and in writing against those efforts or try to bring them to an end or to go around warning people against participating in them. We should rather seek ways of

think. Anyone who thinks the former depends on the latter is going to have a bleak outlook on our chances for unity.

Every Muslim is cognizant of the truth that our hearts should be unified. The problem is to put this truth into practice. Many people love their religion and have a strong desire for unity, but they lack the ability to translate this desire into a reality. Such people – though they may lament the disunity of the Muslims – usually seek to unite people around their own perspectives, opinions, and choices, a task which it is impossible for them to achieve. They should consider history, and see that people did not unite behind those who were far superior to themselves. So how can they ever be so presumptuous to expect all the people unite around them?

What is needed is a framework that accommodates differences of opinion while uniting the people around the basic principles of Islam, not around the opinions and interpretations of a specific individual or group.

In past eras, Muslim unity was understood as political unity under a single government that ruled according to Islamic guidance. This was a reality in the time of the Prophet, the era of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, and during the following era of the Islamic polities that stretched from the East to the West, and to which all the Muslims were loyal subjects.

This is why we find an impressive number of hadith that are stern about preserving this unity. For instance, the Prophet said: “Whoever abandons the community one handspan and dies in that state has died as a person in the state of ignorance before Islam.” [Sahīb al-Bukhārī (7054) and Sahīb Muslim (1849)]

That was a bygone era. The great Muslim polity has turned into many countries that work together and squabble with each other in a manner that is so familiar to us all. Yet, the obligation for Muslim unity remains, even if it cannot be realized in the political sphere. It remains as an obligation, because the Islamic concept of governance exists to preserve the religious rights and worldly welfare of the people. This is agreed upon by all the scholars of Islamic political theory.

These goals remain, but they are transferred to preserving the essential meaning of unity, which is the wellbeing of the people in

their faith and worldly life. Among the things that the Muslims must strive for is to convey Islam’s message and open people’s hearts and minds to its teachings. Likewise, the purpose of leadership is that of organising our efforts in an efficient and effective way. This can be achieved by economic and political cooperation between countries and through well-conceived international programs that enjoy a degree of autonomy and have the capabilities to achieve goals on a scale larger than that of the nation-state.

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going forward together, if just in the way that traffic flows in multiple lanes on a highway without cars crossing each other's paths.

Even if sometimes crossing paths is unavoidable, even cities with the best traffic management have their share of accidents and traffic jams. But then there are bridges and tunnels that allow traffic to cross paths quickly and smoothly. It is the same with life. Those who disagree can still find ways to build bridges between them so they can get on with their work without unnecessary friction and entanglements.

A third negative tendency is to conceive of Muslim unity as being based on agreement in everything. This makes Muslim unity an unattainable ideal that has no connection with reality.

What Are Clear Principles?

When we speak about unity in an Islamic context, we are talking about being united on the unambiguous values and principles that all Muslims accept. These are of three ways to define such a principle:

1. A concept that is fixed and established. It is neither open to modification or substitution, nor has it been abrogated.
2. A concept that is articulated in clear language and is fully explained, leaving no room for ambiguity or hidden meanings.
3. An established rule to which other, secondary matters are referred and in light of which they are assessed.

These indisputable principles, and no others, are the matters upon which we call Muslims to unite themselves. They are the basic, clear matters upon which the Prophet's Companions and the Pious Predecessors who followed them were unanimously agreed. These principles include the obligation to worship Allah, the prohibition of disbelief, polytheism and hypocrisy, and the prohibition of oppression, usury, sexual licentiousness, the

misappropriation of an orphan's inheritance, and all other sins that are clearly stated in the Qur'an and Sunnah

They include the five pillars of Islam (the testimony of faith, prayer, fasting, Zakāh, and the pilgrimage to Mecca) and the six articles of faith (belief in Allah, His angels, His scriptures, His Messengers, the Last Day, and divine decree). They also include the moral teachings that were brought by Prophet Muhammad and all the other Prophets who came before him, like the need for honesty, justice, and respect for parents

These clear, indisputable principles ensure the realisation of two noble aims. The first of these is the protection of the Muslims' faith. They ensure belief in Allah, His angels, His scriptures, His Messengers, and divine decree. They ensure belief in Paradise and Hell and all that this belief entails. Likewise, they ensure obedience to Allah in that they enjoin Muslims to seek Allah's pleasure in their worldly lives to attain salvation in the Hereafter. This is realised for the believing Muslims who have true faith in Allah and His Messenger and follow the light that was revealed to them. Such people will surely find success.

The second aim that is realised is the protection of people's worldly welfare. The scholars refer to this matter as protecting the five universal needs: faith, life, honour, wealth, and reason. Some scholars add social cohesion, freedom, and human dignity to this list. This is perfectly acceptable, because the scholars who identified the five universal needs were not implying an absence of others.

Every command and prohibition found in Islamic Law centres around the preservation of these five universal needs. These needs are secured for Muslims and non-Muslims equally, for the mercy of Islam is intended for all. That is why Islamic Law ensures these rights to non-Muslims who live under Muslim rule and all those who come among the Muslims with peaceful intentions.

Teachings Everyone Can Agree On

There is a tendency to focus our attention on issues of disagreement. This is what gets talked about and studied. This is what the syllabi of schools and universities focus on. It creates the impression that everything is divisive, and this is dispiriting to a lot

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of people. It minimises our perception of the values that we share. These are far greater than people realise, and they can bring our hearts together.

‘Abd Allah b. Mas`ūd said: “Whoever would be pleased to receive the advice that Muhammad gave at the end of his life should read the following verses of the Qur`ān.” He then recited verses 151-153 from *Sūrah al-An`ām*. [Sunan al-Tirmidhī (3070)] These verses read:

Say: Come, I will rehearse to you what Allah has really prohibited you: Do not worship anything along with Him. Be good to your parents. Do not kill your children out of want, for We provide sustenance for you and for them. Do not approach indecent acts, whether openly or in secret. Do not take a life that Allah has made sacred except in the dispensation of justice. Thus does Allah command you that perhaps you may learn wisdom. And do not approach the orphan’s property except to improve it until he attains the age of majority. Give full weight and measure. No burden do We place on a soul greater than it can bear. Whenever you speak, speak justly, even if a near relative is concerned, and fulfil the covenant of Allah. Thus does Allah command you that you may remember. This is My way, leading straight. Follow it. Do not follow other paths. They will scatter you all away from His Path. Thus does He command you that perhaps you may fear Him. [Sūrah al-An`ām: 151-153]

Likewise, Ibn Abī Shaybah quotes Ka`b al-Ahbār saying: “The first of the Torah to be revealed was ten verses, and they are the verses that were revealed in the Qur`ān near the end of *Sūrah al-An`ām*. They are referred to as the Ten Commandments. They are the crux of all the divinely revealed scriptures.” [Musannaf Ibn Abī Shaybah (35855)]

All the Prophets came with Allah’s Message. The different manifestations of the Message shared a lot in common, but they differed with each other in matters. Among the things they had in

common were the Ten Commandments that ensure for humanity the welfare of both their religion and worldly life. As for the matters about which they differed, these were subsidiary issues relating to legal details of what is permissible or impermissible. Such rulings were revealed by Allah for a specific period of time and were thus subject to modification, substitution, and abrogation.

This is why Ibn `Abbās said: “In *Sūrah al-An`ām* there are clear and unambiguous verses. These are the foundation of the Book.” Then he recited: “Say: Come, I will rehearse to you what Allah has really prohibited you...” [Mustadrak al-Hākim (3291)]

It seems as if Ibn `Abbās had been asked about the passage of the Qur`ān which reads: “...in it are clear and unambiguous verses; they are the foundation of the Book” and this was the answer that he gave.

Al-Tabarī quotes a similar statement from Ibn `Abbās in his commentary on the Qur`ān: “The clear and unambiguous verses are the three verses from *Sūrah al-An`ām*, and likewise these verses in *Sūrah al-Isrā`*:

Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him and that you be kind to your parents. If one or both of them attain old age during your lifetime, do not say to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honour. And out of kindness, lower to them the wing of humility and say: “My Lord, bestow on them your mercy as they cherished me in childhood.” Your Lord knows best what is in your hearts. If you do deeds of righteousness, verily He is Most Forgiving to those who turn to him again and again. And render to kinfolk their rights and to those in want and the wayfarer, but do not squander your wealth like a spendthrift. Verily spendthrifts are the brothers of devils, and Satan is ungrateful to his Lord. Even if you have turned away from them seeking your Lord’s mercy that you hope for, speak to them kind words of ease. Make not your hand tied stingly to your neck nor stretch it forth to its utmost reach so that you become blameworthy and destitute. Verily, your Lord provides sustenance in abundance for whoever He wishes and He

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These verses give definition to matters which are clear, indisputable, and indispensable, upon which all unity must have its basis. There are in fact ten clear and indisputable principles outlined in these texts:

1. The obligation of worshipping Allah alone and the prohibition of polytheism.
2. The obligation of showing kindness to one's parents.
3. The obligation of safeguarding life and the prohibition of murder, regardless of whether the victim is one's own child, another relative, or a stranger.
4. The prohibition of indecent acts, both those acts that are openly indecent like drinking, fornication, and adultery, and those that are secret, like the malice, hatred, envy, and hypocrisy that one

harbours in the heart and those acts of indecency that one conceals from others.

5. The obligation of both safeguarding wealth and giving those who are needy what they are entitled to. This includes the prohibition of transgressing against the property of orphans.

6. The obligation of fulfilling one's contracts and covenants, regardless of whether it is a covenant with Allah or with another human being, though the more resolute the covenant, the more serious the matter will be.

7. The obligation of upholding justice in both word and deed – and this is one of the greatest principles – and the obligation of justice in giving weights and measures. Allah says: "So establish weights with justice and do not rig the balance to make the measure deficient." [Sūrah al-Rahmān: 9]

8. The prohibition of arrogance and unethical behaviour. We can distinguish such behaviour and recognize it on account of our common humanity, our reason, and our innate dispositions.

9. The necessity of following the Straight Path of Allah and avoiding paths that are deviant. Allah says: "This is My way, leading straight. Follow it. Do not follow other paths. They will scatter you all away from His Path." [Sūrah al-An`ām: 153] This is referring generally to following Islamic teachings and avoiding base desires.

10. The necessity of not pursuing matters about which one has no knowledge. We must feel responsible for what we choose to listen to and see, and also for our hearts and tongues, since Allah says: "...for surely the hearing, the sight, and the heart all will be questioned." [Sūrah al-Isrā': 36]

Many people feel that they must form an opinion on every matter, even though they may not have the ability or experience to do so. Maybe they are too young or possess insufficient understanding of the pertinent issues. Maybe they have not studied the matter in sufficient depth or are too busy with other more important concerns.

These, then are ten matters we can all agree on. Ibn Taymiyah says:

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All of the Messengers agreed on matters of belief like belief in Allah, the angels, the scriptures, and the Prophets. They also agreed on the fundamental matters of conduct, like those mentioned in *Sūrah al-An`ām*, *Sūrah al-A`rāf*, and *Sūrah al-Isrā'*. This is part of the universal religion that all of the Messengers came with.

Allah says: "He has established the same religion for you that He enjoined on Noah – that which We have sent by inspiration to you, and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, namely to remain steadfast in religion, and make no divisions therein. What you call the idolaters to is dreadful to them. Allah chooses to Himself those whom He pleases, and guides to Himself those who turn (to Him)." [Sūrah al-Shūrā: 13]

When we consider the ten matters that have been enjoined on us, we see that they are crucial for our religious and worldly wellbeing. They do not refer to minor issues and detailed rulings, or contentious matters that are open to different understandings. These are essential values that are not open to abrogation or alteration. They are vital teachings that all other refer back to. People take them for granted because they are not problematic. Instead, they focus on issues where people disagree. Ironically, people forget these essentials and fail to put them into practice in their lives precisely because they are so well accepted.

Establishing Unity

Building Muslim unity on the basis of the general precepts that we have outlined is the best way to ensure that it lasts, because they are clear and unambiguous and because all other matters of religion refer back to them. Equally important is that these principles are permanent and unchanging and leave no room for doubt or criticism. Therefore, if we go forward on these principles, we will not have to worry about falling into dispute about them a few years down the road. Unity built on such sound principles is strong and enduring and impervious to disintegration. When unity is not built on these principles, it is threatened with collapse whenever the people involved grow in understanding or their circumstances

change. The same can be said for unity that is built on the right principles if extra conditions or opinions are imposed as well.

Consider young students of Islam. When they first embark on their studies, they take the opinions and judgments of their teachers and sheikhs as statements of fact, because they do not yet have the ability to investigate matters on their own. However, when they advance in their studies and grow in knowledge to the level where they can do their own research, they start disagreeing with the personal judgments and opinions of the sheikh. The unity of opinion that once existed between sheikh and student ceases to exist. This does not mean that the affection and respect that exists between them must decrease or turn to resentment. If their bond is based on the essential principles they share, and not on their personal opinions, it will endure.

Unity based on something as ephemeral as staunch adherence to a particular opinion is a fragile unity. The same goes for unity based on a specific way of applying the general principles of Islam to a particular set of circumstances. Take for instance, a group of people that unite around the idea of resting between the two prostrations in prayer, or reading aloud in prayer, or performing *qunūt*, taking their issue of choice to be a fundamental condition of faith. When unity is based on something like this, it is destined to fall apart. With the passage of time, people's ideas change. They learn other points of view and the evidence upon which those points of view are based. Those seeking the truth objectively will change their views when they are convinced that another opinion is more correct, breaking up the unity based on commonality of opinion that once existed.

Accepting Differences is Essential for Unity

People can never come together unless they can learn to tolerate differences of opinion. Even prophets differed with each other, in spite of the fact that revelation from Allah would come to them day and night. Look at the story of Moses and his brother Aaron. When Moses was about to leave to go and speak with his Lord, he instructed his brother, saying: "Act on my behalf among the people. Do right and follow not the way of those who do mischief." [Sūrah al-A`rāf: 142]

All of the Messengers agreed on matters of belief like belief in Allah, the angels, the scriptures, and the Prophets. They also agreed on the fundamental matters of conduct, like those mentioned in *Sūrah al-An`ām*, *Sūrah al-A`rāf*, and *Sūrah al-Isrā'*. This is part of the universal religion that all of the Messengers came with.

Allah says: "He has established the same religion for you that He enjoined on Noah – that which We have sent by inspiration to you, and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, namely to remain steadfast in religion, and make no divisions therein. What you call the idolaters to is dreadful to them. Allah chooses to Himself those whom He pleases, and guides to Himself those who turn (to Him)." [Sūrah al-Shūrā: 13]

When we consider the ten matters that have been enjoined on us, we see that they are crucial for our religious and worldly wellbeing. They do not refer to minor issues and detailed rulings, or contentious matters that are open to different understandings. These are essential values that are not open to abrogation or alteration. They are vital teachings that all other refer back to. People take them for granted because they are not problematic. Instead, they focus on issues where people disagree. Ironically, people forget these essentials and fail to put them into practice in their lives precisely because they are so well accepted.

Establishing Unity

Building Muslim unity on the basis of the general precepts that we have outlined is the best way to ensure that it lasts, because they are clear and unambiguous and because all other matters of religion refer back to them. Equally important is that these principles are permanent and unchanging and leave no room for doubt or criticism. Therefore, if we go forward on these principles, we will not have to worry about falling into dispute about them a few years down the road. Unity built on such sound principles is strong and enduring and impervious to disintegration. When unity is not built on these principles, it is threatened with collapse whenever the people involved grow in understanding or their circumstances

change. The same can be said for unity that is built on the right principles if extra conditions or opinions are imposed as well.

Consider young students of Islam. When they first embark on their studies, they take the opinions and judgments of their teachers and sheikhs as statements of fact, because they do not yet have the ability to investigate matters on their own. However, when they advance in their studies and grow in knowledge to the level where they can do their own research, they start disagreeing with the personal judgments and opinions of the sheikh. The unity of opinion that once existed between sheikh and student ceases to exist. This does not mean that the affection and respect that exists between them must decrease or turn to resentment. If their bond is based on the essential principles they share, and not on their personal opinions, it will endure.

Unity based on something as ephemeral as staunch adherence to a particular opinion is a fragile unity. The same goes for unity based on a specific way of applying the general principles of Islam to a particular set of circumstances. Take for instance, a group of people that unite around the idea of resting between the two prostrations in prayer, or reading aloud in prayer, or performing *qunūt*, taking their issue of choice to be a fundamental condition of faith. When unity is based on something like this, it is destined to fall apart. With the passage of time, people's ideas change. They learn other points of view and the evidence upon which those points of view are based. Those seeking the truth objectively will change their views when they are convinced that another opinion is more correct, breaking up the unity based on commonality of opinion that once existed.

Accepting Differences is Essential for Unity

People can never come together unless they can learn to tolerate differences of opinion. Even prophets differed with each other, in spite of the fact that revelation from Allah would come to them day and night. Look at the story of Moses and his brother Aaron. When Moses was about to leave to go and speak with his Lord, he instructed his brother, saying: "Act on my behalf among the people. Do right and follow not the way of those who do mischief." [Sūrah al-A`rāf: 142]

But after Moses departed, the Israelites took a calf for worship. "The people of Moses in his absence took for worship the body of a calf which they made out of their golden ornaments." [Sūrah al-`Araf: 148] Aaron forbade them from this, warning them that their deeds were from Satan and exhorted them to follow his brother. All the same, he remained with them.

When Moses returned and saw what he saw, he became angry. "He threw down the tablets and seized his brother by the hair of his head and dragged him towards him." [Sūrah al-`Araf: 150]

He then rebuked him on his decision to stay with them, saying: "O Aaron! What kept you back, when you saw them going wrong, from following me? Have you disobeyed my order?" [Sūrah TāHā: 92-93] Moses was criticizing Aaron for the stance that he took.

Aaron replied: "O son of my mother! Seize me not by my beard nor by the hair of my head. Truly I feared lest you should say: 'You have caused a division among the Children of Israel and you did not observe my word'." [Sūrah TāHā: 94] He made it clear to Moses that he was looking at the matter from a different angle. He thought it best not to cause division between them and to stay among them until Moses returned and gave a decision on their affair.

Qatādah, a scholar from the students of the Companions, commented on this verse: "The righteous people before you also hated division."

Aaron's overriding concern was for maintaining the unity of the Israelites until Moses returned and decided upon a course of action. During that time, he did his utmost to advise them. Here we have two prophets disagreeing on how to deal with difficult and unforeseen circumstances.

This matter required these two prophets to use their own discretion. They had to gauge for themselves what was in the best interest of the faith. They were not disputing the tenets of monotheism – the message towards which all the prophets called – nor were they disagreeing on whether or not to reject polytheism and its adherents. Such rejection is part of the testimony of faith. They only disagreed as to what course of action would yield the best results, considering the circumstances. (May Allah protect us all

from ever falling so far into ignorance as to presume Moses and Aaron were disagreeing on the principles of faith. That is impossible for the prophets of Allah.)

Another case in point is what went on between Moses and Khidr. Their story is related in the chapter of the Qur'an entitled Sūrah al-Kahf. Moses objected to Khidr's behaviour on three separate occasions. He objected to Khidr drilling a hole in the poor fishermen's boat. He objected to his killing what appeared to be an innocent boy. Finally, he objected to his not taking compensation for repairing a wall in a town of inhospitable people. Khidr then explained to him the unseen reasons for why he did what he did. Khidr also explained that it was revelation from Allah, saying: "I did not do it of my own accord." [Sūrah al-Kahf: 82].

The story of Moses and Khidr gives us an important lesson about how to work with each other in spite of our disagreements. It also gives us a lesson in patience and self control, because most people find it difficult to be patient about things they do not understand. Khidr had instructed Moses not to ask about his actions until he was ready to speak about them. Now, Moses was one of the major prophets. The first time he objected, it was out of forgetfulness, the second time it was out of what he saw as a violation of Allah's Law, and the third time he slipped up, he was required to depart. At this point Khidr graciously explained to him why he did what he did.

We also have the story of the dispute between Moses and Adam. Abū Hurayrah relates that Prophet Muhammad said:

A dispute occurred between Adam and Moses. Moses said: "O Adam! You are our father and you have brought failure to us all. You got us expelled from Paradise."

Adam replied: "O Moses! Allah chose you for His words and wrote them for you with His hand. Do you then criticize me for a matter that Allah had decreed four hundred years before He created me?"

Thus did Adam win his dispute with Moses. [Sahih al-Bukhārī (6614) and Sahih Muslim (2652)]

What happened here is that Moses and Adam – somewhere and somehow – met and had a disagreement. Moses rebuked Adam for something he had done and Adam countered his criticism with something else, and Prophet Muhammad gave a judgment in Adam's favour. He did so because Adam used Allah's decree as a defence for something that had already passed, something that Adam had already repented for and for which Allah had forgiven him.

We also have the story of David and Solomon when two women came to David for a judgment. One of the woman lost her child to an attacking wolf and she claimed that it was the other woman's child who had died. They both went to David, each claiming that the remaining child was hers. David awarded custody of the child to the older of the two women.

When they left, Solomon met with them: "What did the king decide in your case?"

The younger woman replied: "He awarded the child to the older woman."

Solomon said: "Bring a knife." When the younger woman asked why, he said: "I will divide him between the both of you."

The older woman was agreeable to the idea, but the younger woman cried: "Don't do that! He can stay with the older woman."

At this point, Solomon realized who the mother was and restored the child to the younger woman. He then turned to the older woman and said: "If he was really your son, you would not have agreed to have him cut in half." [Sahih al-Bukhari (3427) and Sahih Muslim (1720)]

We also have the story where David and Moses disagreed on what to do about the case when a flock of sheep overran a tract of farmland. Allah says about this: "And We made Solomon to understand (the case); and unto each of them We gave judgment and knowledge." [Surah al-Anbiya': 79]

Then there is the story of the meeting between Moses and Muhammad during Muhammad's ascension. When Prophet Muhammad passed by Moses on his return from his meeting with his Lord, he informed him that Allah had enjoined upon him and his followers fifty obligatory prayers a day. Prophet Moses

responded: "I had to deal with the severest situations with the Children of Israel and I can tell you that your people will not be able to bear that. Go back to your Lord and ask Him to lighten the burden."

Prophet Muhammad returned, and Allah reduced the number of prayers for him and when he went back, Moses told him the same thing. This happened two more times until at length when the prayers were reduced to five, he refused to return to his Lord and ask for another reduction. He said: "I feel ashamed to go back to my Lord again about this matter." [Sahih al-Bukhari (349) and Sahih Muslim (162)]

In this story, we see Moses making an appeal. He attempted to convince him, gave a suggestion, and even applied some pressure. No doubt, Moses had a basis for what he said in the experience he had with the Children of Israel and what he saw of their shortcomings and weaknesses.

Prophet Muhammad accepted his suggestion the first, second, and even the third time. After that he felt ashamed to go before his Lord again with that request. There was a great wisdom behind this refusal, because his followers have the special distinction and status of being the carriers of the final Message and they have qualities not possessed by the Children of Israel.

Allah has made the personalities of different individuals unique. It is a mistake to assume that somebody who is sterner in religious matters is more God-fearing. Often such sternness is merely an aspect of that person's personality and not a reflection of that person's religiousness.

During the Battle of Badr, Allah's Messenger asked his Companions what they thought should be done with the prisoners of war.

Abu Bakr said: "O Messenger of Allah! They are your people and your kinsmen, so spare them and take your time with them. Perhaps Allah will forgive them."

'Umar said: "O Messenger of Allah! They expelled you and they rejected you. Bring them forward and smite their necks."

‘Abd Allah b. Rawāhah said: “O Messenger of Allah! Look for a valley filled with dry brush. Make them enter it, then set them afire.”

Al-‘Abbās said: “You have broken your ties of kinship.”

The Prophet then went inside without saying anything. The people began saying to each other things like: “He will act upon the opinion of Abū Bakr.” and: “He will take the opinion of ‘Umar.” and: “He will accept the opinion of ‘Abd Allah b. Rawāhah.”

The Prophet chose to follow Abu Bakr’s opinion. But when he came outside, this is what he said:

Allah makes some people’s hearts so gentle that they become gentler than milk, and Allah makes some people’s hearts so hard that they become harder than stone. O Abū Bakr! You are like Abraham who said: “And whoever follows me is from me, and whoever disobeys me, then You, O Allah, are Forgiving and Merciful.” And Abū Bakr, you are also like Jesus who said: “If you punish them, then they are indeed Your servants, and if you forgive them, then indeed You are the Mighty, the Wise.”

O ‘Umar! You are like Noah who said: “Do not leave of the unbelievers anyone on Earth!” And ‘Umar, you are also like Moses who said: “My Lord! Make their hearts harder so they will not believe until they see a painful punishment!”

[*Sunan al-Tirmidhī* (1714)]

Gentleness in this case is praiseworthy, because it is for Allah, but at the same time we can recognize it as a personality trait. A person might simply be gentle and hope the best for the people, wishing they accept Islam, become believers, and fear Allah. Abū Bakr is a good example of this type of person. This is why Allah’s Messenger said: “Allah makes some people’s hearts so gentle...” His gentleness was not outside the bounds of Islamic Law, as would be the case if he gave them his approval to commit sins or to transgress against Allah’s laws.

We can see sternness and severity in the same way. This is why the Prophet said: “Allah makes some people’s hearts so hard...” This hardness and sternness is not reprehensible, since it is not born of obstinacy and extremism and it does not seek to deny people their rights. It is sternness for the sake of Allah.

This is not like the reprehensible hard-heartedness mentioned in the verse: “Thenceforth were your hearts hardened. They became like stone or even worse in hardness.” [Sūrah al-Baqarah: 74] We are talking about sternness on truth and anger for the sake of Allah.

Just as Abū Bakr is an example of proper gentleness, ‘Umar is an example of proper sternness. Abū Bakr, though, is better than ‘Umar, since Allah’s Messenger said that if Abū Bakr’s faith was weighed against the faith of all the Muslims combined, his would outweigh theirs. He is the Muslim who carries the epithet *Siddīq*, which means the most upright in faith. He is the best of the Muslims after the Prophet, and he has virtues shared by none other.

Gentleness is better, and that is why Abū Bakr is better. He was closer in character to the Prophet, about whom Allah says: “It was by the mercy of Allah that you were lenient with them (O Muhammad), for if you had been stern and fierce of heart they would have dispersed from around you.” [Sūrah Al-‘Imrān: 159]

This is also why the Prophet said: “Allah is gentle and He grants to those who are gentle what He does not grant to those who are severe, or to those who exhibit any other behaviour.” [Sahīb al-Bukhārī (6256) and Sahīb Muslim (2165)]

The point being made here, however, is that neither gentleness nor severity alone can be taken as an indication of religious piety. A gentle person and a stern person could be equally religious. Gentle people express their religiousness with the gentleness that Allah has placed within them, while stern people express their religiousness through the sternness that Allah has made part of their personalities. All of them, through their deeds, can bring about a lot of good.

We have seen disagreements that have occurred between prophets as well as a disagreement that occurred between the Companions of Prophet Muhammad concerning prisoners of war. The Companions disagreed on numerous other matters as well, so

many in fact that we would be hard pressed to try and enumerate them all.

Similarities & Differences

It is fruitless to deny the existence of disagreement. It is like denying human nature. The best thing to do is to acknowledge its existence and try to place it into a proper framework to ensure it never infringes upon the necessary principles of faith that our Pious Predecessors were unanimous about. There is nothing wrong with setting other guidelines for disagreement as the situation requires, so that matters can be studied and reviewed properly, as long as the basic, indisputable principles of the religion are left intact.

For example, the Pious Predecessors were unanimously agreed on the fact that prayer is an obligatory pillar of Islam and that to believe so is an essential part of faith. At the same time, they disagreed about many details related to the performance of prayer and the conditions for its valid performance. If any of these secondary points is taken as a basis for unity, then discord, polarization, and antagonism will be the inevitable result.

The Pious Predecessors were also unanimously agreed on the fact that the Qur'an was revealed by Allah and that its text is intact. They all recognized the authority of the Qur'an. They differed, however, on the interpretation of many of its verses. They disputed as to whether or not a particular verse was abrogated by another. They differed about the different ways of reciting the Qur'an.

They also agreed about the authority of the Sunnah, since Allah says: "Take what the Messenger gives you and refrain from what he prohibits you." [Sūrah al-Hashr: 7] They disagreed on whether or not certain hadith were authentic. They differed about how to reconcile the meanings of two hadith that apparently contradict one another. They disagreed on how to understand some of the texts. These are some of the reasons for the differences of opinion that they had, even in matters that seem to us so obvious that we are surprised that they disagreed about them at all.

For instance, they disagreed about how the call to pray was to be executed, in spite of the fact that it had been called five times a day every day since the time of the Prophet. They disagreed about

raising hands in supplication while standing in prayer. They disagreed about the exact times of the prayers. They disagreed about many aspects of how to perform the pilgrimage. They disagreed on matters pertaining to Zakāh. We can read about these and many other disagreements in the books of Islamic Law. The fact that these disagreements exist does not give us license to do as we please. It is for the student of Islamic Law to decide about these matters on the basis of the sound principles and methods of that discipline.

Most importantly, they agreed that the Qur'an and Sunnah are the ultimate authorities in Islam, and they agreed on essential ethical principles, though some excelled others in putting those principles into practice. As the saying goes: "A person's true character is revealed in an argument."

Conclusion

This book is a call to put our disagreements into perspective and get them under control, to rise above petty disputation, and to consider what we all have in common. It is a call to preserve our unity and mutual affection, and to see one another in the best possible light. It is an invitation to good manners. Allah says: “Speak with the people in a goodly manner.” [*Surah al-Baqarah*: 88]

The greatest obstacles to our society’s renewal, and the greatest causes of our backwardness and depression, are our deep and divisive disagreements. These disagreements polarise our communities, blur the distinction between people and issues, and confuse religious beliefs with political aims. People cannot differ without becoming belligerent foes.

This situation has weakened the Muslim world, stymied our productivity, and made our nation-states ineffectual. It is a serious matter, and this book is meant as a warning cry. May Allah make us among those who are heedful and have faith, since “Signs and warnings are of no avail to a people without faith.” [*Surah Yūnus*: 101]

O Allah! Unite us and bring our hearts together upon the truth. Reconcile us in our differences and protect us from the evil we have within ourselves as well as the evils of the world. O Allah, Yours is the path of righteousness.

How to Disagree

It seems like everyone can talk about the etiquettes of disagreement in Islam, but few of us are able to put them into practice. It is easy to expect others to exhibit proper decorum when they disagree with us, but we fail to uphold the same high standards when we differ with them.

This is why we need to study the etiquettes of disagreement in earnest. This art needs to be taught in our schools, colleges and mosques. Our youth should be given practical training in debate so they can make these etiquettes a habit and even an aspect of their piety.

Yes, knowing how to disagree is an act of devotion, because in doing so, we obey Allah and put the Sunnah of our Prophet into practice.

This is something we all need to do. Political leaders need to observe the etiquettes of disagreement to uphold the rights of the populace, even those who dissent. Educators need these etiquettes so they can respect their students and teach them to be strong, independent thinkers. Parents need to observe these etiquettes so their children can grow up as healthy individuals with their own thoughts and ideas.

Salman AlOadah

